Computer active

ISSUE 725 | 17 – 30 DECEMBER 2025

Learn something new in every issue

VPN

STOP YOUR VPN BEING BLOCKED

There's a greater risk in 2026 p62

GET A HOME SECURITY SYSTEM FOR JUST £20

You only need this camera page 35

BEAT 2026's PRICE RISES

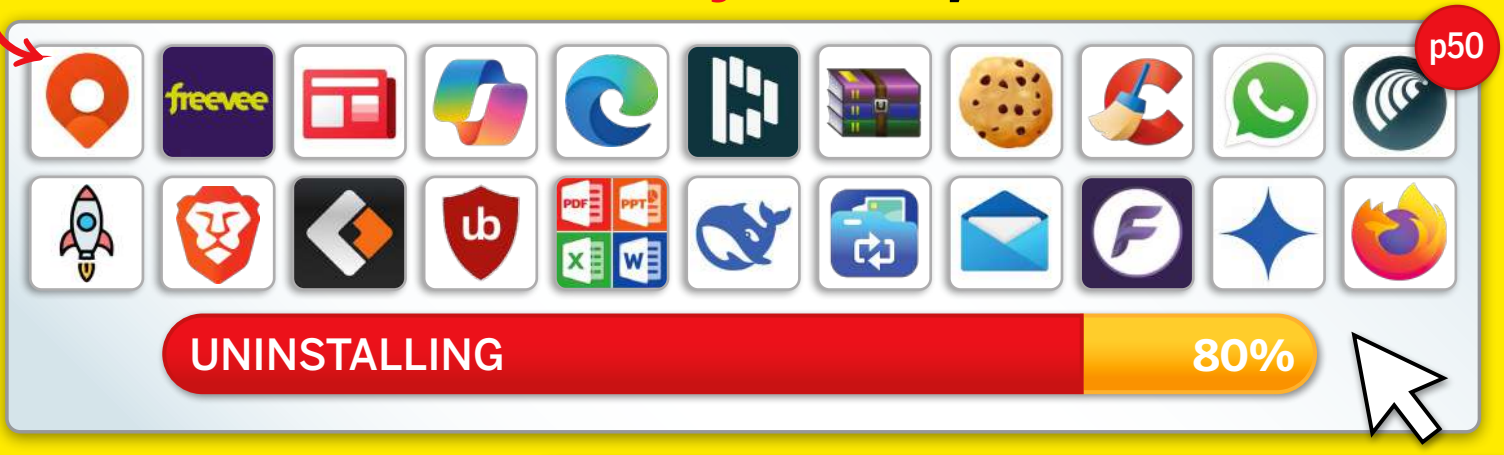
Pay LESS for TV, phones and broadband page 60

Windows 11 is flat out of luck – page 9

What You Must UNINSTALL in 2026!

We removed all this junk – you should too!

p50



PLUS

CONVERT ALL YOUR FILES FOR FREE! p74

BUY THIS FREELY TV BOX (but NOT this Fire Stick!)

We put both to the test

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PCSPECIALIST

WELCOME

From the Editor

I've not counted them all but there must be at least 379 more exciting New Year resolutions than vowing to remove junk from your PC. Yet it tops my list every year. After 26 issues writing about tools, programs and browser extensions my PC resembles a software equivalent of landfill.

Robert Irvine has started his resolution earlier this year by identifying all the rubbish you can safely uninstall. As well as the type of trash I mention above, his Cover Feature reveals TV apps and built-in Windows tools you no longer need.

Perhaps more usefully, he explains how to rid your browser of all the AI dross that tech giants automatically assume you want. At its best AI makes difficult tasks easy; at its worst it simply interferes with jobs you already know how to do (not unlike this Harry Enfield character: www.snipca.com/57376).

But before we get to New Year (and the inevitable price rises – see page 60), let's enjoy Christmas. Best wishes to you and your loved ones.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

THIS ISSUE IN NUMBERS

45 mins
Time it takes the five-star OnePlus 15 phone to charge fully – *p24*

£23.8m
How much Ofcom has fined Virgin for failing to protect vulnerable customers – *p9*

5,553
Number of 'recover your money' scams reported in 12 months – *p11*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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I have a TV Licence.
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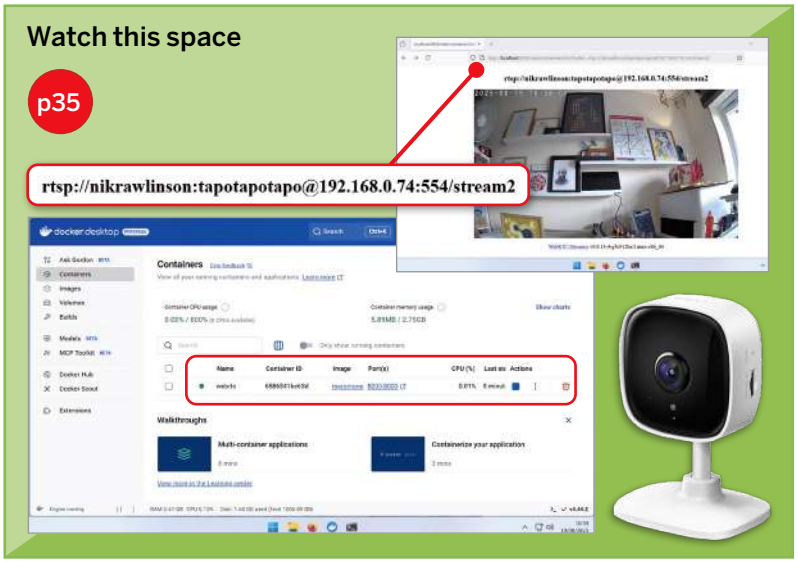
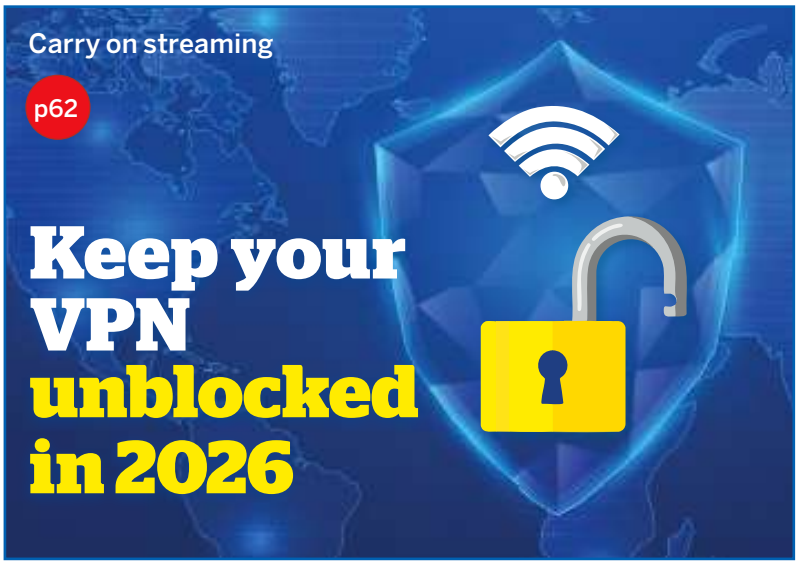




Openreach shuts first copper phone exchange

Openreach has shut down the first telephone exchange ahead of the 2027 deadline for the copper network switch-off. The exchange in Deddington, Oxfordshire, (pictured) is the first of 4,600 to be axed across the UK.

Openreach currently has 5,600 exchanges but will need only 1,000 to provide digital services once it has deactivated the old copper network.

The company announced plans to close Deddington in 2020. It said closing an exchange and moving affected customers is "a highly complex process, which typically takes around 4-7 years – depending on the size and complexity of each exchange" (www.snipca.com/57359).

It has been able to switch off the Deddington exchange because 1,800 copper lines in the area have been upgraded to full fibre. These are served and managed by the nearby Banbury Exchange – one of Openreach's new 'super digital exchanges'.

On average each of these will replace four or five traditional exchanges, though Openreach says some may replace 10 or more exchanges, particularly in urban areas where there are plenty of full-fibre connections.

The closure of Deddington is part of a pilot scheme that was also meant to include shutting the exchanges at Ballyclare in Northern Ireland and Kenton Road in London by the end of November.

But Openreach has delayed these because too many local customers still use copper lines.

The closure of the next 105 'priority exchanges' will take place in four phases over the next five years, Openreach added, and then "accelerate rapidly" after that.

It has announced the next 12 exchanges to close (see box, left), with work due to start in April 2026. Customers will be moved within two years.

WHAT WE THINK

While Openreach is pleased to have closed its first exchange, it's ominous that it failed to shut the two others before the deadline. It understandably doesn't want to deactivate copper landlines for vulnerable customers who use telecare systems. Ofcom recently walloped Virgin with a £23.9m fine for doing just this (see page 9). But it's worrying that Openreach and the internet providers who use its cables still haven't found a reliable way of contacting these customers. We foresee countless problems ahead.

NEXT EXCHANGES TO CLOSE

- Staines
- Thames Ditton
- Baynard
- Wraysbury
- Nazeing
- Langford
- Allestree Park
- Beacon
- Childwall
- Lundin Links
- Carrickfergus
- Glengormley

Virgin adds Tubi's 60,000 TV and films

Virgin Media has added Tubi to its TV service, letting customers watch more than 60,000 films and TV episodes at no extra cost.

It's also available through the Virgin TV Go app for Android and iOS (www.snipca.com/57361).

Tubi, which relaunched in the UK last summer after a six-year break, is a Free Ad-Supported Streaming Television (FAST) channel and claims to offer the biggest collection of free TV, watched by more than 100 million viewers every month.

It has a wide range of films, from newer titles like *Baby Driver* and *La La Land* to classics such as *Birdman of Alcatraz*, *Citizen Kane* and the 1951 version of *Scrooge* (pictured) starring Alastair Sim.

Tubi also has 40 live channels, including one dedicated to reruns of *Pointless* and another showing only *MythBusters*. See the full schedule at www.snipca.com/57364.

Visit Virgin's blog for more details: www.snipca.com/57360.

You'll like this...
Talking Pictures TV is now live on Freely (www.snipca.com/57366)

but not this...
Windows 11's Dark Mode is 'flashing' users (www.snipca.com/57365)

Amazon's U-turn lets you install VPNs on new Fire TV Stick

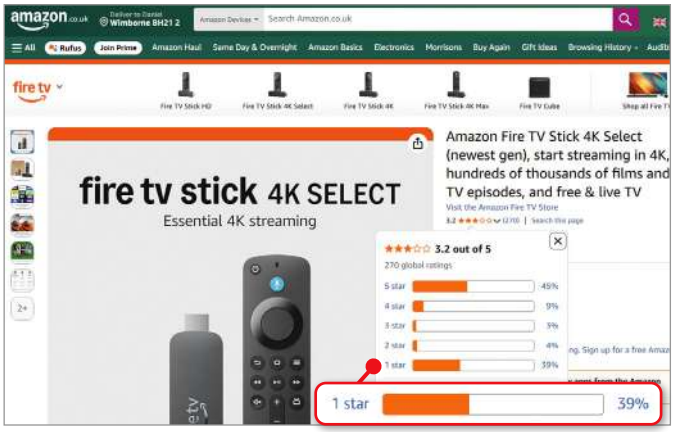
You can now install VPNs on Amazon's new Fire TV Stick 4K Select after what appears to be a huge U-turn by the company.

When Amazon launched the device in October, it had blocked VPNs to stop people using them to access illegal streaming services that show paid-for content such as Premier League football and films.

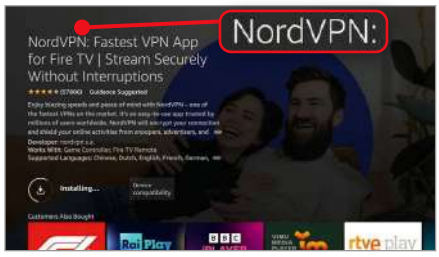
It was part of a clampdown on illegal streaming that also prevents users from sideloading apps to the device. This was the first time Amazon had imposed such restrictions on its TV sticks.

Users widely criticised the move. The device has only a 3.2-star rating on Amazon, with 39 per cent of reviewers giving it just one star (see screenshot above right).

Amazon's change of mind suggests it has realised it went too far in banning VPNs. However, only two VPNs can be installed: IPVanish and NordVPN. Amazon didn't say whether it would allow more to be added in future.


amazon
fire tv
fire tv stick 4K SELECT
Essential 4K streaming
Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K Select (newest gen), start streaming in 4K, hundreds of thousands of films and TV episodes, and free & live TV
3.2 out of 5
1 star
39%

To install a VPN, first make sure your Stick has installed the latest updates. Open 'Settings' in your TV then select My Fire TV followed by About and then 'Check for Updates'.



Next, open the Amazon Appstore on your TV and search for IPVanish or NordVPN (see screenshot left).

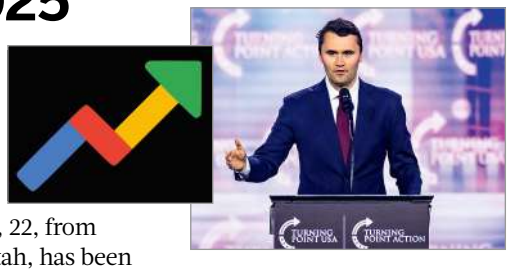
• Why you shouldn't buy the Fire TV Stick 4K Select – page 29

Murder of Charlie Kirk tops Google's UK search trends for 2025

Charlie Kirk topped Google's trending UK searches in 2025 following the assassination of the US political activist in September.

UK'S TOP 10 SEARCHES IN 2025

1 Charlie Kirk
2 Ozzy Osbourne
3 Ed Gein
4 Adolescence
5 Snow warning
6 India vs England
7 Ricky Hatton
8 Diego Jota
9 Club World Cup
10 Iran



Kirk was shot while speaking at Utah Valley University. Tyler Robinson, 22, from Washington, Utah, has been charged with the murder.

The deaths of three other people appear in Google's top 10 – rock star Ozzy Osbourne, Liverpool and Portugal footballer Diego Jota and boxer Ricky Hatton (see box left for full list).

Google's annual 'Year of Search' roundup also reveals that 'When is Easter?' was the UK's most popular 'When is' question, while 'How to verify age on X?' topped the 'How to' chart. See all the UK results at www.snipca.com/57353.

Globally the top search term was Gemini, referring to Google's AI tool.

The results show searches that had the biggest spike compared with the previous year, rather than the most searched terms overall.

Google has been compiling annual lists since 2001, when top searches included Napster, Nokia and Windows XP.

IN BRIEF

PROTON LAUNCHES SPREADSHEET TOOL

Proton has launched an online spreadsheet tool called Sheets, rivalling Google's equivalent of the same name. It's protected by end-to-end encryption and is free to anyone who has a Proton Drive account. Read more on Proton's blog: www.snipca.com/57347. We'll explain how to use it soon.

CRUCIAL MEMORY AXED FOR CONSUMERS

US tech firm Micron will stop making Crucial SSDs and memory for consumers in February, in a huge blow to PC builders seeking affordable kit. The company will instead focus on memory for AI data centres. It blames soaring prices for memory – see www.snipca.com/57344. Beat 2025's price rises – turn to page 60.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

This isn't the world's first edible robot but it's definitely the cutest. It's not for human consumption though. Built by Swiss scientists, it wriggles to mimic live prey to tempt wild boars feeling peckish. But what the boars don't know is that it contains medication. All is explained at www.snipca.com/57343.

IN BRIEF

REPLACE UNSAFE SMARTTUBE TV APP

SmartTube's developer has released a new version of the TV app after his security was compromised. The app (pictured), which you can sideload on Android TVs and Fire Sticks, lets you watch YouTube without adverts. Existing users should uninstall the current app and replace it with the new, safe version from www.snipca.com/57329.

ADD STREAMING TO VODAFONE BILL

Vodafone broadband customers can now add streaming and gaming services to a combined monthly bill as part of the company's 'Add to Plan' scheme. This was previously available only to mobile customers. Introductory discounts include three months free Disney+ and two months free YouTube Premium. Read more at www.snipca.com/57319.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

This Cruella De Vil wannabe is demonstrating the latest AI nonsense to take over social media – influencers surrounding themselves with cute animals (normally puppies and always fake) for no reason whatsoever. We assume the other 90 dalmatians are out of shot.

Credit: Instagram/@anna.wein

ChatGPT getting adverts according to code leak

ChatGPT will soon start showing adverts, according to leaked code for the chatbot.

The code includes references to an 'ads feature' with 'bazaar content', 'search ad' and 'search ads carousel' (see screenshot 1).

OpenAI, which makes ChatGPT, would need to apply this code to the chatbot in order for it to show adverts.

The code suggests ads will appear only when ChatGPT shows results from the internet, rather than unprompted during a chat.

One ChatGPT user has already reported seeing adverts. Yuchen Jin wrote on X that the ad 'Find a fitness class, Connect Peloton' appeared while he was discussing with the chatbot a Podcast interview with Elon Musk (www.snipca.com/57330, see screenshot 2).

Roughly 800 million people use ChatGPT every week, up from 100 million in November 2023 and 300 million in late 2024.

This is a huge untapped market for OpenAI as they seek to offset the massive costs of running AI data centres. If successful the move could challenge Google's dominance in online advertising.

But it's also likely to annoy users who choose ChatGPT over Google precisely because it doesn't show ads. OpenAI didn't comment on the leak.

• Change ChatGPT's personality – page 43

1

```
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.AdsDebugInfo"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.AdTarget"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.AdTargetType"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.ApiAdsDebugInfo"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.ApiAdTarget"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.ApiAdTargetType"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.ApiBazaarContentWrapper"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.ApiEncodedAdData"
"com.openai.feature.ads.data.ApiSearchAd"
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"com.openai.feature.ads.data.SearchAdsCarousel"
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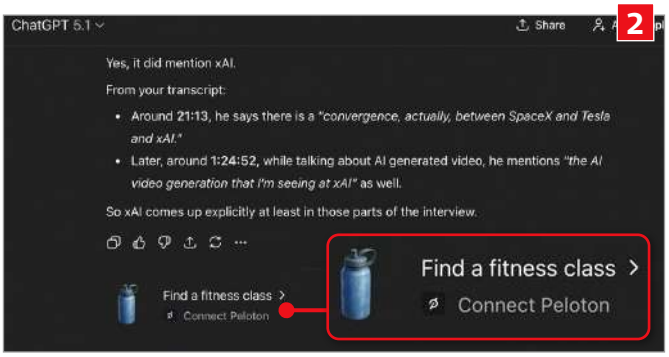
Credit: OpenAI/@btibor91

2


ChatGPT 5.1
Share
Yes, it did mention xAI.
From your transcript:
Around 21:13, he says there is a "convergence, actually, between SpaceX and Tesla and xAI."
Later, around 1:24:52, while talking about AI generated video, he mentions "the AI video generation that I'm seeing at xAI" as well.
So xAI comes up explicitly at least in those parts of the interview.
Find a fitness class
Connect Peloton
Find a fitness class
Connect Peloton

Credit: X/OpenAI/@Yuchenj_UW

Netflix scraps casting to your TV

Netflix no longer lets you cast TV programmes from its app on newer devices.

The change was reported in November by Reddit users (www.snipca.com/57328) and later confirmed by Netflix which updated its support page to say it "no longer supports casting shows from a mobile device to most TVs and TV-streaming devices" (www.snipca.com/57325).

It recommends controlling Netflix using the remote that came with their TV.

The page also lists the devices that you can still cast from (click 'Compatible devices'), including the third-generation Chromecast, released in 2018, and older. It's also still available on TVs that have Google Cast built in.

However, to do this you need to subscribe to one of Netflix's advert-free subscriptions, which cost £12.99 (Standard) and £18.99 (Premium) a month – see www.snipca.com/57327.

Netflix hasn't explained why it scrapped casting, though it might be due to technical limitations with the technology. That was the reason it gave when axing support for Apple AirPlay in 2019.

Netflix users with an ad-supported subscription ($7.99 a month) will be unable to cast from their phones even if they own legacy Chromecast devices.

PC sales to be flat in 2026 as firms stick with Windows 10

Dell has said that sales of Windows 11 computers will be flat in 2026, despite Microsoft axing support for Windows 10 in October.

In its financial results for the third quarter Dell's chief operating officer Jeffrey Clarke said that the pace of businesses moving from Windows 10 to 11 is significantly lower than during the previous transition from Windows 7 and 8.1 to 10.

He added that companies have delayed upgrading to Windows 11 because their existing Windows 10 computers still work well. This affects desktop PCs as well as mini PCs, he said.

Clarke also said there are around 500 million Windows machines in use that are too old to run Windows 11, while another 500 million are capable of running it but haven't upgraded yet.

Many firms have decided to pay for Microsoft's Extended Security Updates (ESUs), which cost $61 (about £46) per device for the first year – until October 2026 – then $122 and $244 for the second and third years respectively (www.snipca.com/57287).

For home users Microsoft is offering ESUs for only one year, until next October.

RECORD SURGE IN ZORIN DOWNLOADS

Zorin's developers claim it has had over one million downloads in the last month, a surge that's broken "all previous records". The Linux distro has proved extremely popular as an option for Windows 10 users who can't or won't upgrade to Windows 11.

Zorin says over 78 per cent of users downloading Zorin "came from Windows" (www.snipca.com/57290).

- We explained how to switch to Zorin in Issue 725 – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/57296.

Virgin fined £23.8m for not protecting vulnerable customers

Ofcom has fined Virgin Media £23.8m for failing to protect vulnerable telecare customers as they moved them from copper-based landlines to digital phones.

The telecoms regulator investigated Virgin after the company reported "a number of serious incidents related to the migration of telecare customers in November and December 2023".

Ofcom's subsequent investigation "uncovered serious systemic failures in Virgin Media's migration process between August 2022 and December 2023".

It added that Virgin failed properly to "identify and record the status of telecare customers". This meant those affected "did not receive the appropriate level of tailored support through the migration process".

Virgin also put "thousands of vulnerable customers" at risk of harm when disconnecting them because it prevented their telecare systems from connecting to alarm-monitoring centres.

Ofcom said that when deciding how much to fine Virgin it considered "the vulnerability of the customers affected; the significant duration of the contraventions; the seriousness of the breach; and the significant degree of potential harm caused."

It added that Virgin has "taken significant steps to remedy the issues" following a pause on migrations in December 2023.

Virgin said: "While historically the majority of migrations were completed without issue, we recognise that we didn't get everything right and have since addressed the migration issues identified by Ofcom."

The fine will be paid to HM Treasury. Read Ofcom's report at www.snipca.com/57295.

IN BRIEF

APPLE MAKES FIRST iPHONE SE OBSOLETE

Apple has added the original iPhone SE (pictured) to its list of obsolete devices, meaning it will no longer repair the phone or offer replacement parts. The iPhone SE was released in 2016 and Apple stopped selling it two years later. Apple deems devices obsolete seven years after the company stops selling them. See the full list at www.snipca.com/57299.

LINUX-BASED OFFICE TOOL RELEASED

Linux-based office suite Collabora has been relaunched as a new desktop program, available for Linux, macOS and Windows. Its developers, based in Cambridge, say the new software looks and feels similar to the online version. Read their blog at www.snipca.com/57301 and download it from www.snipca.com/57304.

PAY TO ACCESS PLEX TV APPS REMOTELY

Plex users will soon need a Remote Watch Pass (£1.99 a month) or Plex Pass (£4.99) to stream content remotely through its TV apps. The change will apply to the Roku app first, followed by all other TV apps in 2026. Read more on Plex's forums: www.snipca.com/57300.

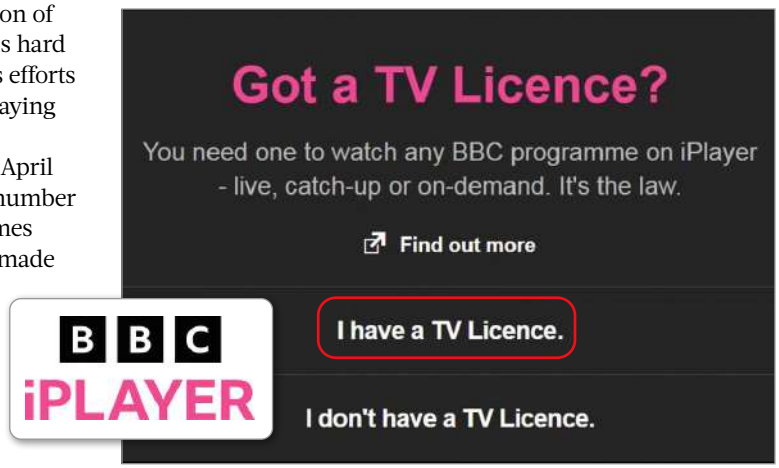
Should the BBC use iPlayer to catch licence-fee dodgers?

MPs want it to find a better system than knocking on front doors

For a demonstration of incompetence it's hard to beat the BBC's efforts to catch viewers not paying the TV licence.

In the 12 months to April 2025 it increased the number of officers visiting homes from 172 to 229. They made two million visits, an increase of 50 per cent, yet prosecutions have fallen by 17 per cent. The result is the BBC losing over £550 million annually from people evading the licence fee (about three million households).

The BBC says people have simply stopped answering the door to their officers. It's easy now to see who's knocking with a glance at your phone. If it's someone you want to avoid, why bother leaving the sofa?


Got a TV Licence?
You need one to watch any BBC programme on iPlayer - live, catch-up or on-demand. It's the law.
Find out more
BBC iPLAYER
I have a TV Licence.
I don't have a TV Licence.

> "The BBC says people have simply stopped answering the door to their officers"

It would be an unexpected effect indeed if the rise of video doorbells led to the demise of the world's oldest broadcaster.

MPs think they have the answer: track viewers watching iPlayer instead. Since September 2016, you've needed a licence to watch the iPlayer, closing a loophole that let you watch programmes on demand for free.

You can spend the entire year not tuning into any live BBC TV, but watch 10 seconds of *Line of Duty* on iPlayer and you'll owe the BBC £174.50.

On the face of it chasing iPlayer viewers seems to make sense. It's the one part of the BBC on the up – in the past year viewers watched 4.5 billion hours of programmes, up roughly a quarter. Around 15.2 million people watch iPlayer once a week, up from 14.1 million.

The recommendation comes in a report (www.snipca.com/57377) into the BBC's finances by Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC), led by MPs that scrutinise the spending and efficiency of publicly funded bodies.

It follows evidence given to the committee in September by leading BBC figures, including the then Director-General Tim Davie and Shirley Cameron, the BBC's Director of Revenue Management.

Labour MP Chris Kane asked why they couldn't use the login details for the iPlayer to track viewers and make sure they pay the licence fee. Cameron said this wasn't possible because viewers don't need to submit their home address to create an iPlayer account.

Davie took a more ideological view, saying the BBC could block non-paying viewers "tomorrow" but that he doesn't think it's "the right thing to do". Unlike purely commercial broadcasters like Netflix or Disney+, which force viewers to pay, the BBC's remit as a public service broadcaster means it must think about serving as many people as possible.

But as the committee's report points out, this approach risks alienating the 23.8 million households that do pay the licence fee. It warned that "without visible enforcement, licence fee payers who do comply may start to question the fairness of the system". It called for the BBC to "modernise licence fee collection" by developing methods "suited to monitoring online viewing".

At the moment all you have to do is click 'I have a TV licence' on iPlayer (see screenshot). But stronger measures might mean your data being sent to the BBC for verification.

Or the BBC could simply prevent non-payers from signing in. The committee also told the BBC to start moving from paper to digital licences.

However, what will surely worry Davie's replacement is whether those three million fee dodgers will actually pay up when given no choice. They might instead join the 3.6 million households (up by 1.2m in five years) who legally avoid paying by declaring they don't watch live TV.

That could prove to be one crisis too many for the BBC.

THE FACTS

- A parliamentary report has called for the BBC to start tracking iPlayer use to catch people who aren't paying the licence fee
- TV licensing officers made two million home visits last year – an increase of 50 per cent – but prosecutions fell by 17 per cent
- The BBC loses over £550 million annually from people evading the licence fee

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

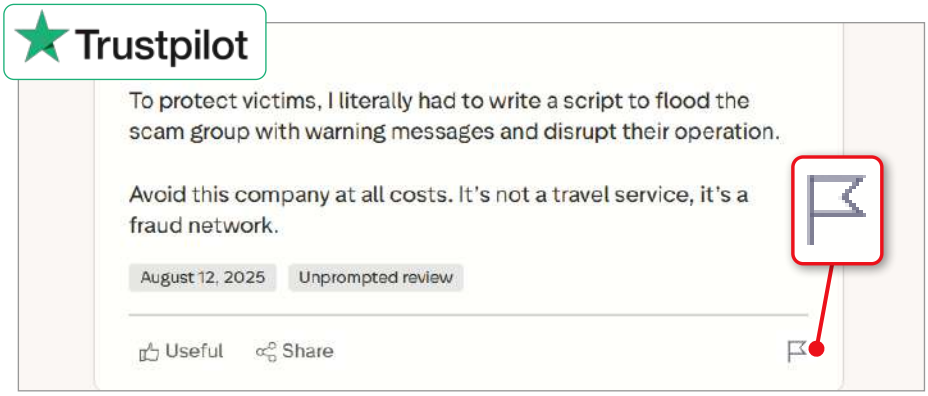
Fraudsters promising to help after scams

What's the threat?

Devious scammers are offering to help scam victims recover stolen money. They target people who write on the popular reviews site Trustpilot about being scammed and say they can provide professional assistance.

This tactic has been spotted before on social media and by email. Often the scammers offering help are part of the same gang that committed the original scam, using a different name. But consumer group Which? has now seen six services offering assistance to people posting on Trustpilot. Many were listed as being based in the US but had websites registered in Germany. None was registered with the UK's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).

Which? also found plenty of suspicious reviews for these firms on Trustpilot. In one example, 93 positive reviews of a specific company were written by the same person on a single day.


Trustpilot
To protect victims, I literally had to write a script to flood the scam group with warning messages and disrupt their operation.
Avoid this company at all costs. It's not a travel service, it's a fraud network.
August 12, 2025
Unprompted review
Useful
Share

In the 12 months to November 2025 Action Fraud received 5,553 reports of recovery scams across all methods, amounting to stolen cash worth £185.4m. Trustpilot told Which? that it's investigating the companies and has taken down many of the fake reviews.

How can you stay safe?

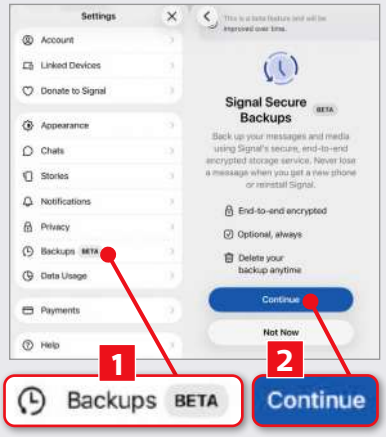
Always ignore any offer to recover your money – legitimate companies will never contact you to offer this. If you've lost money, report it to your bank and the police. If you've lost gift vouchers, report it to the retailer. If you paid by bank transfer, you might be a victim of Authorised Push Payment (APP) fraud. Since October 2024, banks must reimburse faultless victims of this scam.

If a company offers to recover your money on Trustpilot, report it by clicking the 'Flag this review' icon (see screenshot).

New tools | Signal's Secure Backups

Signal is probably the most private messaging app. It uses end-to-end encryption (E2EE) by default for all messages and calls, and doesn't store any metadata.

In September, it launched Secure Backups for Android devices, letting you back up your message history using E2EE, and has now added it to iPhones and iPads. The feature means you won't lose your messages should you lose your phone or if it's stolen. To access your backup Signal generates a 64-character recovery key. It's vital you keep this safe because Signal can't help you find it if you lose it.



It's free for 100MB of text messages (more than enough) along with the past 45 days' worth of photos, videos and files. You can extend this indefinitely, and get a 100GB limit, for $1.99 (about £1.50) a month.

To turn on the feature, which is still in beta, click Settings then Backups (1 in our screenshot) followed by Continue 2. Read more at www.snipca.com/57219 and install the app from www.snipca.com/57221.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

Fake Google One subscription

To the best of my knowledge I've never given Google a penny, so I was surprised to learn that I had 'made a subscription purchase from Google Commerce Limited on Google Play'. This came in an email supposedly from no-reply@official-mailing.com. A quick search online revealed it to be fake. The email said I'd been signed into a yearly subscription for 2TB storage at Google One, and that it would cost me €99.99 a year. I only had two days to cancel this. It was a reasonably convincing scam, with the proper Google Play logo and it even mentioned my correct email address.

Les Baker

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

AI will leave millions without a job

Michael Lewis refers to disasters like train and aeroplane accidents when predicting what mayhem AI might cause (Letters, Issue 724). But the much bigger threat is to jobs. I started working in a bank in the City in the early 1980s as part of a graduate scheme. I've moved companies several times, but my role is roughly the same. But bit by bit that role has been eaten away – first by automated software and more recently by AI.

Fortunately, I will retire next year, so I'm getting out just in time. But the generations coming up behind me won't be so lucky. The graduate schemes that I benefitted from barely exist now. The Covid lockdowns began to kill them, but the rise of AI has accelerated their demise. Tasks that took me half a day back in the early 1980s now take AI a couple of minutes, so there's really very little for graduates to do.

I know doomsayers throughout history have warned how technology will destroy jobs. What's saved us in the past is new jobs being created. I don't see that happening at the moment. This time feels different. If I'm right, millions of people will be made redundant in the next few years.

David Williams

Mid-contract price hikes keep overall prices low

I'm a long-term TalkTalk customer and so I didn't enjoy reading about the company raising mid-contract price rises (Issue 724, page 7). But I also want to defend the company because I couldn't find anything cheaper when I shopped around.

I wondered why this was, because I keep hearing from friends and so-called experts online that smaller, regional providers are cheaper. But it seems that while these smaller firms don't raise the price of contracts halfway through, they charge a lot more from the beginning. Comparing TalkTalk's packages with those from smaller firms, this seemed to be the case.

So, the blunt choice is between cheap deals with the big boys that increase over your contract, or expensive plans from the minnows that stay the same price throughout. I'm sticking with TalkTalk.

Tony Drake

Price rises might make cheaper phones better

It's obviously bad news that memory shortages will drive up phone prices in 2026 (Issue 724, page 8), but there might just be a silver lining to this cloud. I can see high-end models becoming more expensive as manufacturers target society's high earners. This will squeeze the mid-range phones, meaning they won't show much improvement.

The consequence of this will be cheaper phones getting some of the features usually reserved for mid-range devices. It could mean, for example, a £300 phone getting the kind of storage or screen quality you currently have to pay £500 for.

Timothy Bland

CA SAYS Timothy's reasoning is sound, but it's unlikely to happen. New features almost always appear in high-end phones first then mid-range models, and only later in budget phones. Cheaper phones rarely overtake mid-range in specifications.

In 2026, memory shortages are expected to push phone prices up across the board. Budget models may still improve, but the upgrades will probably be smaller and slower than mid-range phones, so cheaper phones are unlikely to get relatively better. See page 60 for our tips on beating 2026's price rises.

Misleading to say 5G has 97-per-cent coverage

I was reading Ofcom's Connected Nations report (www.snipca.com/57132), which you mentioned in Issue 724 (page 8), and noticed it was boasting about improved 4G and 5G coverage. I even saw the figure of 97 per cent used to describe 5G coverage. But this is for people, not area. Isn't that rather meaningless? I might be able to get 5G in my house, and pick it up again in my sister's house 20 miles away. But in the drive between through local villages it cuts in and out.

Ofcom should come up with a new measurement that gives a satisfaction score taking into account not just regional coverage but how reliable it is. At the moment, it seems to assume we are all beamed from one house to another and enjoy perfect signals.

Mel Craddock

What's the Issue...?

I want to start using an authenticator app, so need to re-read your recent review of them. When did it appear?

Paul Northman

CA SAYS In Issue 712, page 62. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/57149.

I need a new PC monitor but can't afford a brand new one. When did you explain how to find a decent refurbished model?

Stephen Hook

CA SAYS In Issue 717, page 62. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/57148.

I've just started using RustDesk to remotely connect to my father's PC. Didn't you publish a How To on this software last year?

Harry Grainger

CA SAYS We did, in Issue 695 (page 35). Read it on our 2024 USB Back Issue Stick (www.snipca.com/53180).

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If we are unable to resolve your complaint, or if you would like more information about IPSO or the Editors' Code, contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk

I prefer DVDs because they're not censored

I wholeheartedly agree with Robert Togneri (Letters, Issue 723) and others on why DVDs beat streaming. But the main reason I still buy physical discs is that the original content cannot be cut or altered to reflect today's views, be that popular or not. I like to appreciate the film as it was when it was released rather than now when social views shy away from certain topics. You only have to watch the original *Dr No* from 1963 and watch the modern streamed version to see how it's been changed to reflect current times.

Ian Crossley

CA SAYS **Several readers have emailed us with the same view. We understand how it feels reassuring to know DVDs you own can't be censored in any way or be altered to reflect changing attitudes. Ofcom doesn't ban older programmes outright, but broadcasters have to follow rules on "harm and offence", which means some channels avoid showing material that might spark complaints or require heavy warnings.**

In September, the channel Rewind TV got round this by putting a 1956 Tony Hancock show on YouTube (www.snipca.com/56106, pictured), which

doesn't restrict content in this way. Rewind TV said the episode "reflects the language and portrayals of its time" and was being shown in full "for historical record and discussion".

You're wrong about Chromebooks

It's disappointing that in 2025 Chromebooks (and ChromeOS) are still seen by some as limited to "what your browser can manage and apps in the Chrome Web Store" (as per your review of the Lenovo Chromebook 14 (pictured below right) in Issue 721, page 24.

Chromebooks have been able to run Linux apps since ChromeOS 69 (circa 2018) and the large software repositories available to ChromeOS are the same ones available to the likes of Linux Mint and Zorin – both recommended elsewhere in *Computeractive* recently but without any software-related reservations.

To describe the Lenovo Chromebook 14 as "a laptop that doesn't quite know what it wants to be" and ChromeOS (with regard to available software) as a "restrictive operating system" is surely a somewhat disingenuous conclusion.

Pat Wolverton

CA SAYS **Pat's right that Chromebooks can now run Linux apps, a feature Google introduced with ChromeOS 69 in 2018. This lets users install many desktop-style programs, not just web or Android apps. With more people switching from Windows to Linux (see page 9), we'll make sure to mention this in future Chromebook reviews. However, not all Chromebooks can run every Linux app. Indeed, some laptops that come with Windows can also struggle with Linux. We'll explain these limitations in our next issue – out Wednesday 31 December.**

STAR LETTER

Nothing wrong with charging customers for missed appointments

At the risk of provoking the wrath of the whole of *Computeractive*'s readership, I think there's nothing wrong with BT and other broadband companies charging customers for missed appointments ('Question of the Fortnight', Issue 724, pictured).

I've worked in domestic repairs all my life – for national and local companies – and also been self-employed for a while. During all those years I'd estimate about 10 per cent of appointments were wasted because the homeowner wasn't in. That's the figure BT quotes too, and it sounds about right.

I realise not everyone can answer the door quickly, so I always wait 15 minutes after calling. I always knock as well as ring because video doorbells are often out of power. I always check around the back too, if possible, and phone the customer if I have their number.

What customers must realise about missed appointments is the knock-on effect of wasted visits. Occasionally, I can phone the office and squeeze in an extra appointment, but most of the time a missed appointment just adds to the backlog.

Some of my previous companies used to ask me to pop back to a house if the customer returns. But this often meant doing so in my own time. I had little choice though. It was unfair then, and I bet most broadband engineers would agree it's unfair now.

The point about a charge for missed appointments is that it must be a deterrent. If it's too cheap, customers will just factor it into the overall price of having broadband. I think £50 is an appropriate amount. BT shouldn't be embarrassed about introducing this fee. It should promote it more loudly to promote the importance of keeping appointments.

Matthew Potts

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Any more operating systems for me to try?

I love playing with different operating systems, so how's this for a mixture? In my office I use Windows 11 and in my lounge I use Raspberry Pi, mainly for web browsing and watching two football matches at the same time along with the TV. In my workshop I use Zorin OS in an old all-in-one computer and my wife uses Linux Mint in her work room. Along with Apple and Android phones that's six at the moment but I'm always looking for more. Any suggestions?

Colin Stone

CA SAYS **There are several we can think of, but first let's hear what readers have to say. Which operating system should Colin try next?**

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

I've switched to Vodafone, so why is Virgin still charging me?

LEAD CASE

Q I decided to move my broadband from Virgin to Vodafone because it was cheaper. I used Ofcom's One Touch Switch (OTS) process (www.snipca.com/57195) and hoped everything would go smoothly. I returned Virgin's set-top box and router as requested, but it kept billing me. I paid £140 because I was worried about the legal implications if I didn't, but the bills keep coming. Can you help?

Peter McGinley

A We spoke to Virgin Media on Peter's behalf and the matter's now been fully resolved. It has refunded the payments Peter made and cancelled his contract.

We can understand why Peter was frustrated with Virgin, but the fault might lie with Vodafone. When switching Ofcom's OTS system puts all the emphasis on the company you're moving to. It's up to your new provider to ask your old one for your details and to make any necessary changes. Virgin may have been slow to do this, but ultimately that's not Peter's fault. Vodafone is responsible for handling the switch, regardless of how slowly Virgin may have acted.

We've received several emails from readers disappointed that the OTS system isn't working as smoothly as Ofcom intended. In particular, there's a persistent problem in overlapping payments – where you're paying for both your old and new broadband. If this happens to you, contact your new provider immediately to flag up the problem. It should do everything it can to resolve the issue with your old provider. But also email your original provider so you have a record of your attempt to resolve the matter. You should also check and, if necessary, cancel any direct debits to avoid automatic payments during the overlap.

CASE ONGOING

Can TomTom stop updating my satnav?

Q When I bought my TomTom Start satnav it came with free "lifetime updates", but these have now stopped. I know "lifetime" could refer to the life of an item, but my satnav works perfectly. The data is now likely to be unreliable, so do I have any rights?

Ken Wilson

A No, it's unlikely Ken will have any rights relating to unreliable data. The term "lifetime" is misleading – as well as the working life of a device, it covers software updates it can support. The only way Ken may have a case is if TomTom promised a period of support that hasn't been honoured, but we doubt it would have done that.

Ken didn't say which TomTom satnav he owns, but some Start models were released over 15 years ago. Even the Consumer Rights Act only offers protection for up to six years maximum. Modern maps contain far more data than older satnavs can handle, so TomTom considers these models obsolete even if they still work normally. Before buying a TomTom, it's worth checking the company's list of obsolete products www.snipca.com/57222.

CASE CLOSED

CASE UPDATE

Virgin refunds reader £57 for faulty landline

Virgin Media has refunded reader Andrew Higgins for the period his phone wasn't working (see Issue 720), though it took him more effort than it should have.

In July, his Virgin landline went dead. Callers could hear ringing at their end, but the phone never rang in his house. Virgin initially refused a refund for this period because Andrew hadn't reported it sooner, but this was irrelevant.

By the time Virgin offered to fix the fault Andrew had had enough and wanted to cancel his landline. This complicated things a little, but we still advised Andrew to ask Virgin for a deadlock letter, which would have strengthened his case against the company were he to report it to the Communications Ombudsman (www.snipca.com/57262). We also phoned Virgin to ask why he hadn't refunded Andrew, but didn't receive a satisfactory explanation.

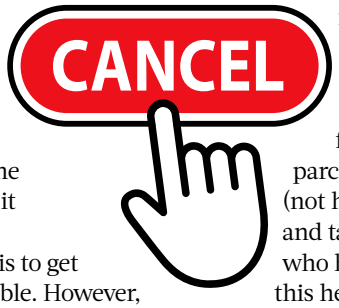
Whatever the reason, Andrew is pleased that Virgin eventually sent him £57 to cover the time the landline was faulty. If he had wanted to stay with Virgin he may have got more money back under Ofcom's automatic compensation scheme, which refunds customers £9.98 for each day a service isn't repaired. However, this scheme applies only to customers who want to keep the service that's not working.

Why can't I cancel an order before despatch?

Q I bought a router online on Friday afternoon but then remembered I was going away for a week and so wouldn't be in to receive it. However, when I cancelled the order on Saturday morning the retailer said it had already sent the router and I couldn't cancel. Instead, it said I'd have to refuse delivery. I said I wouldn't be able to do this because I'd be abroad. What a mess! Doesn't the law force retailers to give you longer to cancel an order before despatching it?

John McDonald

A No, the law doesn't give customers a grace period for cancelling an order before despatch. Once you place the order, the retailer can send it immediately. Indeed, most customers would expect this to get the item as quickly as possible. However, retailers must make cancellation easy online, by email or over the phone. If they make this hard and it therefore takes too long to cancel before dispatch, then you might have a case against them – though it would be difficult to prove.



In the end John was fortunate because the parcel was left on his doorstep (not his designated safe space) and taken in by a neighbour who he had phoned. By doing this he was deemed to have accepted delivery but then had 14 days to tell the retailer he was rejecting the item and a further 14 days to return it (at his own cost).

CASE CLOSED

Can Tesco refuse help with faulty phone after 30 days?

Q In early September, I bought the IMO Dash phone for £24 from Tesco Mobile (www.snipca.com/57196, pictured). However, it kept shutting down and failed to maintain a charge.

I returned it to Tesco, who said it was faulty. But the company said it wouldn't help because I was outside the 30-day limit and my purchase wasn't covered by its extended Christmas returns offer. Will I have to contact the manufacturer instead?

Malcolm Lee

A No, Malcolm should stick with Tesco because this case is entirely its responsibility. It's true that after 30 days Tesco can refuse a refund and choose instead to repair or replace the phone – but only one of these. It's not allowed to switch to a replacement if a repair fails, or vice versa. It's disappointing that Tesco's staff didn't know this.

We're also baffled as to why they thought its Christmas return policy is relevant. This states that any purchases made between 1 October and 24 December can be returned until the end of January 2026 (see www.snipca.com/57197). Malcolm bought his phone before this period, so it doesn't count. And even if he had bought it after 1 October, Tesco must still offer him a refund, repair or replacement for six years (five in Scotland).

Malcolm has been let down by terrible customer service. We've asked Tesco why he was given the wrong information and insisted it should deal with him immediately.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Moonpig let me change order after I made errors

For the past few months, Moonpig has been asking me to purchase a card online. I finally gave in when they offered me one for free – a timely offer, since I have a friend with a birthday coming up (which I'm sure they knew!). So I accepted, placed the order and everything went smoothly.

Later, I decided to order four Christmas cards and paid via PayPal. I then realised I'd made a few mistakes and wanted to correct them, but discovered that once an order is completed, it can't be updated, even though I'd set a delivery date of several weeks in the future.

I spoke to its chatbot, but it simply said the office was closed. To my surprise, the next morning I received an email offering to cancel my order and issue a credit for the full amount. They also allowed me to start over. In the end, everything worked out perfectly.

John Ryan

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Moonpig

- **Email and live chat**
  www.snipca.com/57116

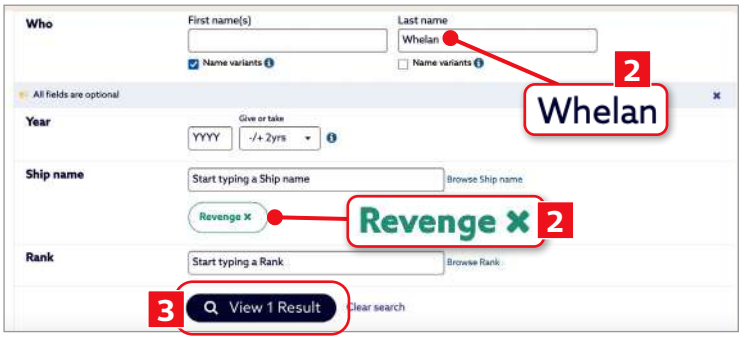
Grow Your Family Tree

If your ancestors took part in Nelson's finest hour, follow **Richard Holt's** advice to...

Search the Battle of Trafalgar Prize Book

The Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 saw 27 British ships under Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson take on the combined Franco-Spanish fleet commanded by Vice-Admiral Pierre-Charles Villeneuve. The British won decisively, losing no ships, while the Franco-Spanish fleet lost 22 of its 33.

The Royal Navy brought captured enemy ships into port and sold them along with their cargo and guns. The proceeds, called 'prize money', were shared among the crew involved in the capture. Many ships taken at Trafalgar were later destroyed in a storm, so the Government added a £300,000 grant to compensate, alongside any prize money from salvaged ships. This money was then distributed among the officers and crew who had taken part in the battle.



Searching for the surname 'Whelan' and the ship 'Revenge' produced one result

Browse Findmypast's 17,000-strong index

Findmypast, in partnership with the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth, has released 'British Royal Navy, Battle of Trafalgar Prize Book', a collection that includes digital images of one of only two surviving prize books. Though the original records are incomplete, the database still indexes 17,090 individuals.

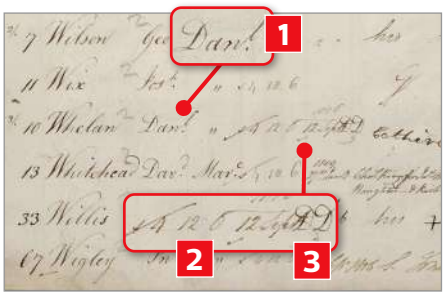
To search the prize books, enter a name at www.snipca.com/57102 and narrow results by ship and rank if you know these. The records show the prize amount awarded and often state who collected the money, whether the officers or crew members themselves, family members or other representatives acting on their behalf.

I was interested in Dennis Whelan, son of Dennis and Catherine Whelan, born on 6 January 1794, at the British Lying-in Hospital in Middlesex. He was only 12 when killed in action at Trafalgar. The 'Trafalgar Ancestors' database on The National Archives website (www.snipca.com/57103) shows that his mother, Catherine, applied for Royal Bounty, a lump sum equal to one year's wages payable to widows, dependent children, or mothers of those killed in action.

I searched the prize book records for 'Dennis Whelan' with no results, but entering the surname 'Whelan' (1 in our screenshot above) and the ship name 'Revenge' 2 produced one entry 3.

The reason I didn't get any results when searching for 'Dennis' is that his name was actually recorded as *Daniel* Whelan (abbreviated to 'Dan.l' (1 in our screenshot below).

The document shows that his mother, Catherine, collected £4 12s 6d on 12 September 1806 2 (about £290 in today's money, according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator www.snipca.com/57136). The letters 'DD' 3 for 'Discharged Dead' indicate that Dennis had been killed in action.



Dennis Whelan's mother received £4 12s 6d after he died at Trafalgar

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

My great-uncle worked for the Metropolitan Police in the early decades of the 20th century, but I don't know much about what he did. Are there any online records that could shed some light on his career?

Doug Staines

First, search for him in Ancestry's 'London, England, Metropolitan Police Pension Registers, 1852-1932' (www.snipca.com/57117), adding his discharge date if you know it. The results should contain his warrant number and annual pension. Also read this guide from the National Archives (www.snipca.com/57118), which explains which records it keeps. Finally, check whether he appeared in any trials at the Old Bailey, where records are kept between 1674 and 1913 (www.snipca.com/57119).

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search new World War 2 records

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Feeling worn out? You're not alone. Nearly half of us in the UK aren't getting our recommended daily amount of magnesium, an essential mineral for energy release.

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Our diets can lack good sources of magnesium like kale, spinach, black beans, nuts, bananas and whole grains. To help, many people take supplements containing magnesium oxide.

But there's a catch – magnesium oxide isn't always easy for some of us to absorb, and taking lots of it can lead to an upset stomach.'

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Why choose Magnesium+?

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Science you can trust

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MGF645

Your first box is free (just pay £1.50 postage) and you will be enrolled into a flexible subscription costing £12 every 28 days, which you can cancel at any time, without obligation.

Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

VIDEO CONVERTER

Any Video Converter Free 9.1.5

www.snipca.com/57260

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

The last time we included Any Video Converter (AVC) Free in this section (Issue 717, page 18), we explained how to use its new browser for downloading videos. We were less pleased that it had started prompting you to upgrade to its Pro and Ultimate versions before performing certain actions.

Sadly, those nags still appear in version 9.1.5, but AVC has again offset our annoyance by adding several genuinely useful features. The upgrade prompts are easy to dismiss by clicking Continue – unlike in some freemium programs (see our Cover Feature on page 50), they're not aggressive.

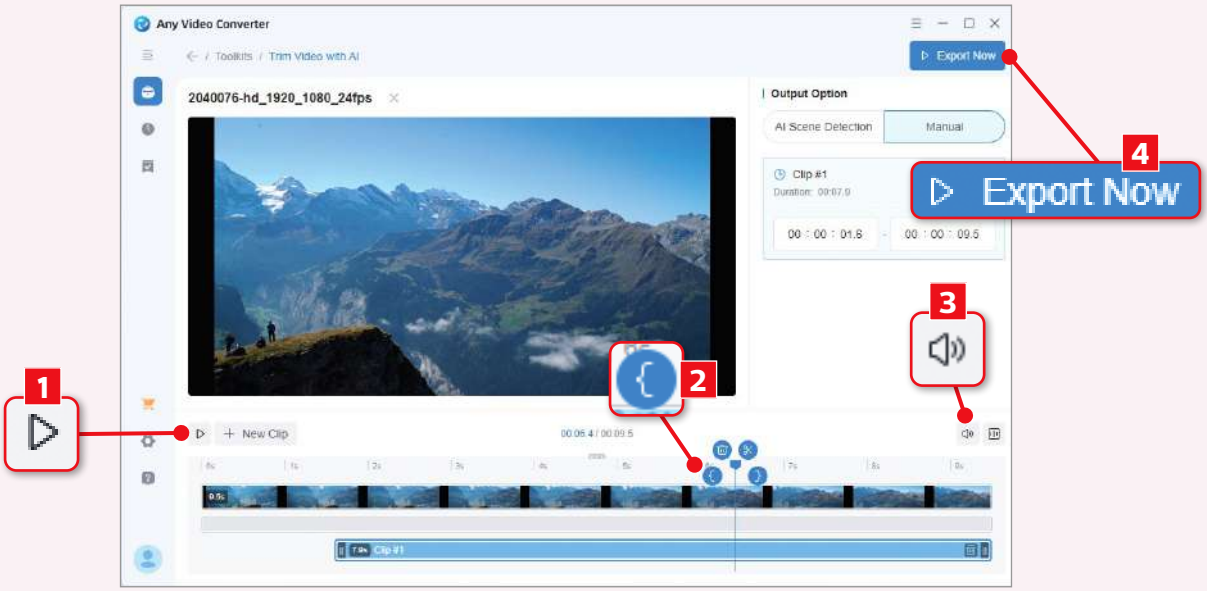
The biggest new addition is a timeline for AVC's Merge Video and Trim Video tools. This brings it closer in line with traditional video-editing software, by providing an easy visual way to rearrange clips, set their start and end points, and remove unwanted segments.

The Trim Video tool also offers AI Scene Detection, which automatically detects cuts and transitions in videos, but this is only available in AVC's Ultimate edition, which costs £45.29. Irritatingly, it doesn't tell you this until after you've downloaded the AI model.

The 'Crop Video' tool has also been improved to provide 'smoother interaction'. This simplifies the process of changing the width and height of videos, and rotating and flipping them, as well adjusting their aspect ratio to, for example, 4:3 or 16:9.

AVC's Video Download feature now lets you download YouTube playlists as well as individual videos. To do so, click the YouTube icon on the Video Download screen to launch the video browser, then sign into your YouTube account. Select a playlist and click 'Add to Parsing List' then Parse Now. Click 'Download Now' to save all the playlist videos in MP4 format.

Unlike most free downloaders, there's no limit on the size or number of videos you can save. AVC also downloads videos from Instagram, TikTok, Vimeo and other services.



1 To use the updated Trim Video tool in Any Video Converter, select that option on the home screen, then click Add Media File(s) and choose a video. Click the Play button to watch the video before you make any changes.

2 Trim the beginning of a video by dragging the slider on the timeline to the point where you want it to start. Click the plus-sign icon to create a new clip and timeline layer, then the left-bracket symbol to mark the start point.

3 Now drag the slider to the point where you want the video to end and click the right-bracket symbol. If you make a mistake, click the bin icon to delete the clip and start again. Click the speaker icon to adjust the video's volume.

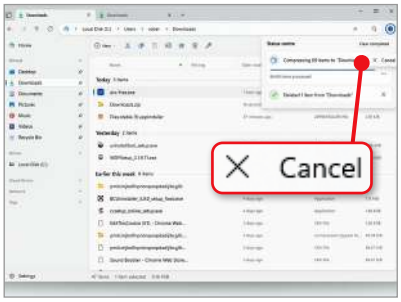
4 Click the Export Now button to save the trimmed clip as an MP4 file without affecting the original video. Click 'Continue' to skip the upgrade prompt. You can convert the video to another format using AVC's Format Convert tool.

FILE MANAGER

Files 4.0.21

www.snipca.com/56242

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



Our favourite free alternative to File Explorer has made some small but welcome tweaks to its interface. These include a new Discovering message in the 'Status centre' in the top-right corner, which reassures you that Files hasn't frozen when it's performing time-consuming tasks such as indexing the contents of a large drive. The 'Cancel' button for ongoing operations has been moved to a flyout (three-dot) menu (see screenshot), to prevent you from clicking it accidentally while waiting. When you extract files from a ZIP, 7z or RAR archive, you can now paste the path of the folder you want to save them to, instead of browsing for it manually, and select recently used paths from a dropdown menu. Files now lets you hide its status bar for a 'cleaner, more minimal look'. Click the Settings cog, then Appearance and switch off 'Show status bar'.

IMAGE VIEWER

FastStone Image Viewer 8.2

www.snipca.com/57258

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

FastStone Image Viewer has long offered more features than its name suggests, and the latest update adds further useful tools. Most notably, you can now compress multiple images into a ZIP archive to make them easier to share and store. Click the Create menu and choose Zip Archive (or press Alt+Z) to open a ZIP Archive window. Click 'Add' to select images, then Create (see screenshot) to compress them in an archive – you can also resize them as JPEG files. When you import photos from a camera, phone or SD card (by choosing 'Import Photos and Videos' in the File menu, then 'Select files manually') you can now decide whether to show their names or dates under their thumbnails. Additionally, the program can now open and save images in the WEBP format while retaining their metadata.

SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Uninstall Tool

www.snipca.com/57256

Price: £19.60 **Free trial:** 30 days

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

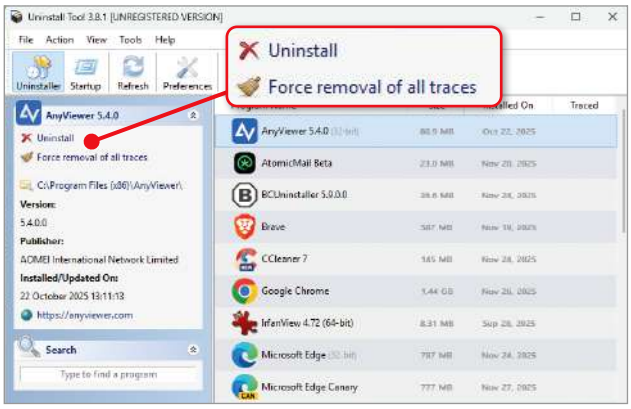
We've tested lots of software uninstallers, but until now we'd never come across the blandly named Uninstall Tool. That's surprising because it's been around for 20 years. A recent update brought it to our attention.

Unlike most uninstallers, the program isn't free or freemium, but has a fully functional 30-day free trial that lets you explore its features. We were impressed by how quickly it loaded and listed our installed software, but less enamoured of the Windows XP-style interface.

Selecting a program displayed information in the side panel, including the version number, publisher and install date. There were also options to uninstall that tool or forcibly remove leftover traces (see screenshot). Neither prompted us to create a system-restore point, but this sped up the removal process.

Frustratingly, when we selected multiple programs by pressing Ctrl, the Uninstall option disappeared from the side panel, the Actions menu and the right-click menu. Uninstall Tool's website confirmed batch-uninstall is only available for Microsoft Store apps.

These are listed on a separate tab, which is easy to miss at the bottom of the window. There's also a handy tool for managing startup items and a System Tools menu offering access to Windows' own removal features, such as Add/Remove Programs.



OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Uninstall Tool is a nice little program, if dated in design, but it's not worth paying for. See page 52 of our Cover Feature to discover our preferred software uninstaller, which is completely free to use and has a lot more features.

What should I download?

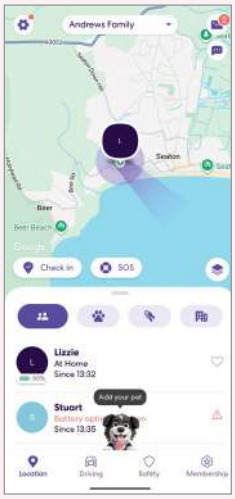
We advise you which software and apps to use

How can I keep track of my family?

Q I need to track my family member's phones just to make sure they are safe and sound. Is there a program or app that does this? I have an Android phone.

Alan Buxton

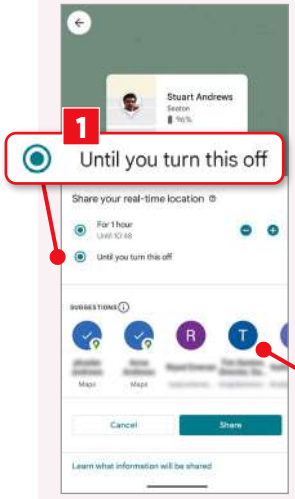
A This isn't difficult, though you should get your family's permission first. The best advanced option is the app Life360 (Android www.snipca.com/57068; iOS www.snipca.com/57069, pictured below left), which has a free basic plan. Every family member installs the app and joins a family 'circle'. They can then all keep track of each other's whereabouts.

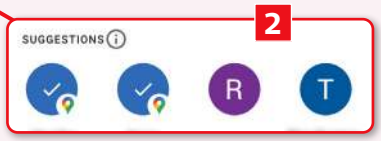


The free version tracks family members while they're driving, and notifies you when they get home. However, you'll need to upgrade to a paid-for plan for crash notifications and for more than two locations in the (likely) event that you don't all live and work in the same places. Prices start from 6.99 a month (www.snipca.com/57105).

If you need more basic features, use location sharing in Google Maps (Android pre-installed; iOS www.snipca.com/57059 – you'll need to set up a Google account).

Tap your top-right profile icon or initials then 'Location sharing'. Next, tap 'New share', then look for 'Share your real time location'. Tap 'Until you turn this off' (1 in our screenshot left), then select family members from the Suggestions 2. Finally click Share, and each contact will be invited to view your location.

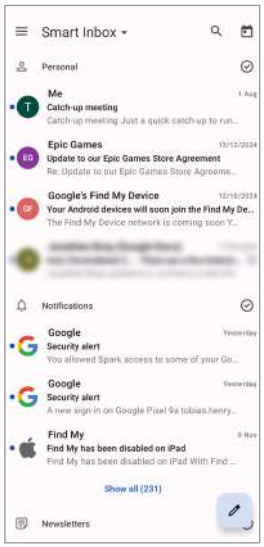




What's the best replacement for Outlook lite?

Q Microsoft has 'retired' the 'lite' version of Outlook for Android and is replacing it with the full version. But I don't want all of Outlook's features, only the basic tools. What do you recommend?

Ian Machen



A Try Thunderbird (www.snipca.com/57060), which is easy to use, free of unnecessary features and works great with multiple email accounts. Another good choice is Spark Mail (www.snipca.com/57101). It will try to offer you a trial of the premium version, but the free features are good enough for organising your inbox, and it bundles all your notifications and newsletters together. It has a slightly stark design (see screenshot), but this helps you prioritise reading your emails.

What's the best OCR software for editing PDFs?

Q Can you suggest good-quality OCR software (free or paid-for) because I'd like to edit PDFs and I'm unable to do so in LibreOffice.

Terence Keggs

A Readiris17 (www.snipca.com/57062, pictured) comes packed with features and you can buy it for a one-off £65 purchase rather than as a subscription. It converts scanned documents to editable PDFs, and also convert PDFs and images into text documents you can edit in Microsoft Word or LibreOffice. But if all you need to do is convert a PDF's text into content you can search or edit, use Google Docs instead (https://docs.google.com). Upload the PDF then right-click the document and select 'Open with' followed by 'Google Docs'. Be aware that doing so can sometimes mess up the formatting.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

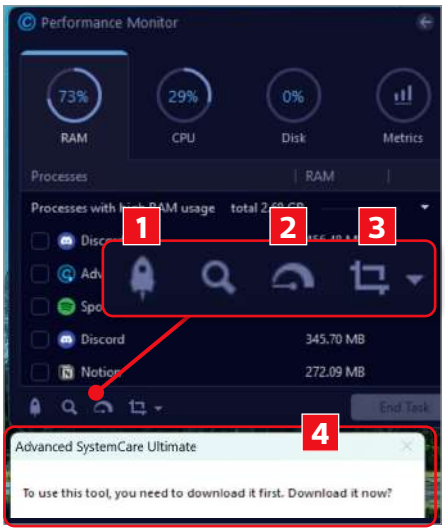
SOFTWARE WARNING!

IObit's memory-cleaning baloney

Take a look at the three screenshots on the far right. They show different results for the amount of memory IObit's new SystemCare Ultimate 18 claimed it could free up on my PC. You might expect such different results days or weeks apart, but these were all taken within five minutes.

Such suspicious results didn't surprise me. Most programs that magically claim to declutter your PC are utterly pointless, and you should certainly never pay for any. IObit wants $26 (about £20) a year for SystemCare Ultimate 18 (www.snipca.com/57185). Spend the money on mince pies instead.

This is about IObit's 563rd appearance in 'Named & Shamed'. Each time it has devised a new trick for annoying users. The latest is the Performance Monitor widget that appears on your desktop when you install SystemCare Ultimate 18. Launching it, then clicking the Rocket button (1 in our screenshot above right) triggers its memory-cleaning miracles.



Download IObit's screenshot tool? You must be mad...

The 'Boost' button 2 also did nothing while the screenshot icon 3 asked me to download who knows what? 4.

I uninstalled it quicker than you could say 'snake oil'. Can't wait for IObit's 564th appearance.

Make up your mind IObit – can you free up 3.1GB, 365MB or 2.8GB of memory?

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Opera names its "mindful cat" Inara
www.snipca.com/57178

"The name has origins in several different cultures going all the way back to the Bronze Age, where Inara first appears as the Hittite goddess of wild animals. Similar to the ancient Greek goddess Artemis, Inara represents beauty, purity, and spirituality. She embodies a return to our most elemental selves, paired with a sense of oneness with the world around us."

WHAT THEY MEAN

We know it's a pretentious name, but we've got to keep pretending a browser cat isn't our worst ever idea.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

HSTikkyTokky

As you might guess from his moronic pseudonym, HSTikkyTokky is a popular influencer on TikTok (the HS stands for Harrison Sullivan – his real name). Sadly, his fame has only grown since he crashed his McLaren 720S 'supercar' in Surrey in March 2024. He was going 71mph in a 40mph zone. He then fled the UK and taunted police with videos from Qatar and Spain.

He was finally arrested in October after returning and must have been fearing a jail sentence. But after pleading guilty to dangerous driving and driving without insurance he was instead handed a one-year suspended sentence and a two-year driving ban.

OK, he'll also have to wear an electronic tag for three months and complete 300 hours of unpaid work, but I'm still stunned he wasn't sent to prison. What kind of an influence is that?

MINI PC | **£900** from Scan www.snipca.com/57181

MSI Cubi NUC AI+ 2MG

Right on the button

MSI's new mini PC packs plenty of punch into its sleek black case, but that's not all it has going for it. As well as all the performance and features you'd look for in a small home-office computer, it's also a Copilot+ PC with access to Microsoft's latest AI features. It even has a dedicated Copilot+ button on the front (highlighted in photo right).

> "Runs all of Copilot's AI features, which are normally reserved for laptops"

With its 136x133m (WxD) footprint it won't take up much desk space, and its 51mm height offers a fairly low profile. You can also mount it to the back of a monitor, and power it either via the HDMI output that turns on the PC when the monitor turns on, or through a wired external power button, which plugs in on the side. The HDMI link only works with compatible MSI monitors, so the wired button makes a decent fallback option.

Beyond the HDMI port, you have two USB 3.2 Gen 2 ports, a microSD card reader and a 3.5mm audio socket at the front, then two USB 2.0 ports, two Thunderbolt 4 ports and two 2.5Gbps Ethernet ports at the rear (pictured below). If you'd rather stick with wireless networking and peripherals, it has built-in Wi-Fi 6E and Bluetooth 5.3.

Our only complaint is that there's just one HDMI port and no dedicated DisplayPort socket, so if you want a multi-monitor setup, you'll need a Thunderbolt 4-to-DisplayPort cable or adapter.

During testing, we were surprised by how quiet the Cubi ran, even compared with other powerful mini PCs. Despite this, its Core Ultra 7 258v processor was faster than both the GMKtec NucBox M6 Ultra (www.snipca.com/56684, reviewed in Issue 722).

If you're just browsing the web or running office apps then you won't notice much difference, but if you're using several heavy-duty creative apps or creating 3D graphics, then the NucBox M6 Ultra will provide a smoother, speedier experience.

But the Core Ultra 7 does have a newer and faster Intel Arc 140v integrated GPU, plus a 48 TOPS NPU. This allows it to run the full suite of Microsoft's AI features, which are normally reserved for its Copilot+ laptops. You get real-time AI captions and translations; Windows Studio Effects for video calls; and even Microsoft's Recall feature. If you're happy with Copilot snooping on your activities it can make files and documents easier to find. We also found its ability to summon up Copilot at a touch of the button on the front really useful, letting us then chat with it using the Cubi's built-in mic.

This little machine isn't perfect. While you can swap the 1TB M.2 SSD for something larger, there's no way to upgrade the 32GB RAM – and it is fairly expensive for a mini PC. But if you want a quiet compact machine with AI capabilities as well as all-round computing power, this one's worth the extra expense.

SPECIFICATIONS:
Octa-core Intel Core Ultra 7 258v processor • 32GB RAM • Intel Arc 140V graphics • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.3 • 2x 2.5Gbps Ethernet ports • 1x HDMI port • 2x USB 3.2 Gen 2 ports • 2x USB 2.0 ports • 2x USB-C/Thunderbolt 4 ports • MicroSD card reader • Windows 11 Pro • 51x136x133mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/57181

VERDICT A powerful mini PC with comprehensive AI features, though it's more expensive than most

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox K11 £700 Enough power and connectivity for demanding tasks, plus support for external graphics cards

LAPTOP | **£179** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57127

Asus Chromebook CX1505CKA

Through the net

Chromebooks priced under £200 usually lack the power and features for even the most basic uses, but Asus's Chromebook CX1505CKA is surprisingly competent. At 20mm thick and weighing 1.59kg, it's neither as thin nor as light as it first appears, and its build quality would never be mistaken for a premium laptop. There's too much flex in the mostly plastic chassis and the hinge is too loose to hold the screen at certain angles.

> "It will easily manage multiple browser tabs and online apps"

All the same, it doesn't look like a bargain- basement Chromebook either. In fact, the blue, green, pink or silver finishes give it a stylish feel.

All the ports are located on the left-hand side, with just one USB-A and one USB-C, plus an HDMI output and a 3.5mm audio socket. Given that the USB-C port will be out of commission while charging, that's not a lot to be getting on with. Still, with Wi-Fi 6E built in you can get a fast internet connection, and you have Bluetooth 5.4 for hooking up a headset or a wireless mouse.

You might want to consider doing so. The keyboard is respectable, despite its soft feel. The keys press down lightly and consistently, while the layout feels spacious, even with a numeric pad crammed in. Sadly, the touchpad isn't so effective. The surface isn't smooth enough for your fingertip to glide across, while the cursor jumps at times. Sometimes it registers a touch as a mouse click then ignores an intentional tap.

Happily, the CX1505CKA gets most other things right. With a dated Celeron processor and just 4GB of RAM we had some serious concerns around performance, but as long as you don't expect it to juggle multiple apps or play games smoothly, it doesn't feel slow.

It will easily manage multiple browser tabs and simple, online productivity apps like Google Docs, Gmail or Microsoft 365. Variants with Intel Core 3 processors, 8GB of RAM and double the storage (128GB, £209 from www.snipca.com/57131) will give you scope for multi-tasking, but also cost £40 more.

Meanwhile, the 15.6in screen is more dazzling and vibrant than we usually see from budget Chromebooks, and the 1920x1080-pixel resolution looks bright and clear. Battery life isn't brilliant, with just seven hours of video playback, but even that is adequate. Plug in a mouse and it's a perfectly usable Chromebook, which is more than you could normally hope for at this price.

SPECIFICATIONS

Dual-core Intel Celeron N4500 processor • 4GB RAM • Intel UHD graphics • 15.6in 1920x1080-pixel 60Hz IPS screen • 64GB eMMC storage • 1x USB 3.2 • 1x USB-C • 1x HDMI 1.4 • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.4 • ChromeOS • 20x360x232mm (HxWxD) • 1.59Kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/57127

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Tom's Hardware (www.tomshardware.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT An incredibly cheap Chromebook that's great for everyday tasks, despite limited performance levels and so-so battery life

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Lenovo Chromebook Plus 14 £499 More power, a stunning screen and an eye-catching design justify the extra cost

SMARTPHONE | **£879** from OnePlus www.snipca.com/57159

OnePlus 15

Makes all the right calls

If a smartphone genie handed us three wishes for a dream phone, we'd struggle to create a device as brilliant as the new OnePlus 15. It delivers battery life that will get you through multiple days, a stunning and durable design, plus a strong selection of features, including some you won't find on other Android phones. Throw in a great screen, an excellent camera and incredible performance, and OnePlus's new flagship phone is hard to fault.

> "Charge it on Monday morning and it'll still be working on Wednesday night"

Its looks are simple but refined. There's a prominent camera bump (pictured below), but it's shaped and positioned to make sure that everything aligns with style. The whole thing is IP68 water- and dust-resistant, so sand, rain or submersion can't threaten it, and it feels slim and light, yet impressively robust. It's a shame though the cheapest version with 12GB of RAM and 256GB of storage is only available in black – the pricier 16GB/512GB alternatives come in gorgeous ultra-violet and sandstorm finishes.

The screen is phenomenally good. In tests it's not quite as bright or colour-accurate as the Google Pixel 10 Pro, but it can still reach dazzling brightness levels of 1800cd/m² for use outdoors, and its colours are rich and vibrant. What's more, it supports a constant 120Hz refresh rate for smoother scrolling, and can hit as high as 165Hz when gaming.

This would be pointless if the OnePlus 15 didn't have the power to achieve that level of frame rate, but its Snapdragon 8 Elite Gen 3 processor and Adreno 840 GPU ensure that it can. You can play demanding games with all the graphics options turned up and still get super-smooth gameplay. Aside from games, apps load quickly and run without delays.

OnePlus's OxygenOS (based on Android 16) makes the most of the screen and processing speed, while packing in useful features like a widget shelf and a pop-up sidebar. It's easy to customise, and looks great whether you have a group of widgets adding functions to your home screen or prefer the clean and simple approach. It includes useful AI tools for transcribing recordings, taking notes and enhancing photos.

The camera array on the rear rises to almost every occasion, with a main 50-megapixel camera plus a 3.5x optical zoom and ultrawide lens. It's superb at shooting fast-moving subjects, even when using the zoom, and photos have better edge-to-edge clarity than snaps from the Pixel 10 Pro or Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra. It has several modes, but also plenty of control, and can even shoot photos underwater with the colour balance shifted to adjust for the blue light.

Yet the OnePlus 15's best feature is its class-leading battery life. You can charge this smartphone to full on Monday morning and it will still have charge in the tank on Wednesday night. We also found it charged incredibly quickly with an 80W charger, reaching 80 per cent in half an hour or 100 per cent in 45 minutes. Pair it with a OnePlus AirVOOC wireless charging pad (£49 from www.snipca.com/57160) and it can charge faster wirelessly than an iPhone 17 with a cabled charger.

Overall, it's a superb phone, but Samsung's A56 remains our overall favourite for delivering a fantastic screen and excellent cameras at a much lower price (£499, see page 32).

SPECIFICATIONS:
Octa-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Elite Gen 5 processor • 12-16GB RAM • 6.78in 2772x1272-pixel resolution OLED touchscreen • 256-512GB storage • 50-megapixel rear main camera • 50-megapixel rear telephoto camera • 50-megapixel rear ultrawide camera • 32-megapixel front camera • IP68 ingress protection • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 6.0 • OxygenOS 16 based on Android 16 • 161x77x8.2mm (HxWxD) • 211-215g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/57159

VERDICT With its spectacular battery life and performance, this is the perfect premium Android phone

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy S25FE £499 The design and features of a flagship phone for less

NAS DRIVE | **£170** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57337

Ugreen NASync DH2300

Stream on

This Chinese-made NAS drive is a reasonably priced, basic model that's ideal for backing up all data on your household's PCs or for keeping an archive of your music, video and photos. It doesn't do the advanced stuff you might expect from more expensive units, with no features aimed at developers or for running virtual servers.

> "The big surprise is the HDMI port, letting you connect it to your TV and play music and videos"

You can fit two 3.5in hard drives or SATA SSDs up to 30TB in size, giving you up to 60TB of storage if capacity is your priority, or up to 30TB if you'd rather mirror (back up) the data from one drive to the other for safekeeping.

The drives slide in vertically, which makes them easy to install, and the compact case and magnetic lid make for a sleek and stylish device. There are just four LED indicators – covering power, the Ethernet connection and activity relating to the two drives – and a single USB 3.2 port on the front, with all the other connections at the rear.

You can't expect 2.5Gbps Ethernet at this price, and the single Gigabit Ethernet port will be fine for most users. Otherwise, you have another two USB 3.2 ports that can accommodate external drives for data transfer or extra storage, plus a single USB-C.

The biggest surprise is the HDMI port, which enables you to connect the DH2300 to your TV and play music, slideshows or videos directly from it using Ugreen's software. Alternatively, you can stream over the network to your smart TV or media-player apps.

It's easy to sync the DH2300 with multiple laptops and PCs for backup, or connect it to online-storage services and download the latest versions of your files.

Transfer rates are impressive, limited more by the speed of your hard drives and Gigabit Ethernet connection than the eight-core Rockchip processor or 4GB of RAM. In tests, we could more than double the 118MB/s file-transfer speeds by plugging Ugreen's 2.5Gbps Ethernet adapter (£19 from www.snipca.com/57192) into one of the USB ports and connecting it to our router. It's another thoughtful extra that makes this the perfect starter NAS.

VERDICT Offers speedy file transfers for simple backups and media streaming without breaking the bank

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE TerraMaster F4 SSD NAS £342
With up to four SSDs and a 5Gbps Ethernet port, this NAS gives you seriously speedy storage

SPECIFICATIONS
8-core Rockchip RK3576 processor • 4GB RAM • 2x 3.5in SATA hard-drive bays • 3x USB 3.2 ports • 1x USB-C • 1x Gigabit Ethernet port • 1x HDMI port • 214x98x151mm (HxWxD) • Two-year warranty
www.snipca.com/57337

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

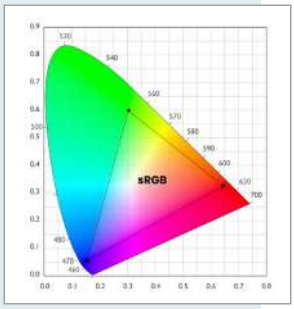
sRGB

What is it?

sRGB (standard RGB) is the standard colour space used by monitors, printers, laptop and tablet screens, graphics programs and the internet. It specifies a range of colours created by different combinations and intensities of red, green and blue light. In the image below it's the colours covered by the triangle.

How does it work?

The aim of sRGB is to ensure you have consistent colours across different screens and printed output, so that the image you work on in your photo-editing program will look the same on your laptop screen, monitor or TV screen and when it's printed out. It should also look identical on someone else's screen. sRGB has also become a way of measuring the colour-reproduction capabilities of a screen. A good display will show all the sRGB colours accurately. A bad one can only show a smaller percentage of those colours, meaning images will look artificial or washed out.



Credit: BenQ

What are the specs?

Ideally a screen can display 100 per cent of the sRGB colour space and have a colour gamut (ie, the full range of colours it can show) that goes beyond 100 per cent of sRGB. Some cheaper laptop or tablet screens can only display between 60 and 80 per cent, while the worst examples might be stuck between 45 and 60 per cent.

Can I change it later?

No. It's determined by the design of the screen, so you're stuck with it. The best you can do is calibrate your display to work around its weaknesses and show as much of the colour space as possible, though this isn't easy without expensive specialist equipment.

EARBUDS | **£219** from Apple www.snipca.com/57252

Apple AirPods Pro 3

Hear to help

Apple's latest high-end AirPods are less a pair of headphones than an auditory Swiss army knife – at the ready for taking calls, protecting your hearing or simply enjoying music while you're out.

Apple promised longer battery life and improved active noise cancellation (ANC), and has delivered on both. They now last for up to eight hours of listening time with ANC turned on – two hours longer than the previous AirPods – with a further 16 hours of charge from the case. In practice, with all features turned on, this can drop to 5.5 hours, but it's still a significant improvement. Noise cancellation is now exceptional, with even fewer outside sounds creeping through than on the AirPods Pro 2.

For best results, a precise fit is important, so it's good that Apple now includes five choices of tip. Choose the right one and sound quality is excellent. An extra mic points into each ear and measures your ear's acoustics, then applies an equaliser setting that adapts in real time, so you're always getting the best sound.

These are the first Apple AirPods to have heart-rate sensors. These are highly accurate, and you can pair your Pro 3 directly with an Apple Watch for music and fitness tracking if you'd prefer to leave your iPhone at home while you jog or cycle.

> "Measures your ear's acoustics to make sure you get the best sound"

Revamped hearing-aid features both test your hearing and amplify the sounds around you in Transparency mode for up to 10 hours. They can also pair seamlessly with all your Apple devices, including Apple TV for some quiet late-night viewing. Meanwhile, real-time location finding features make it even easier to track down your missing AirPods using your iPhone or Mac.

The most cutting-edge feature here is real-time translation, though it's also now supported on the AirPods Pro 2. Paired with an iPhone, which handles all the heavy processing, they can convert French, German, Portuguese and Spanish into English in real-time, and the Translate app can turn your English words to the same foreign language, with your words appearing, translated, on the screen. Our tests with a native French speaker showed it works well, and Mandarin, Italian, Japanese and Korean are set to follow.

Not everyone will find the AirPod Pro 3's enhancements essential, but these are a worthy upgrade, and one of the standout buds of 2025.

SPECIFICATIONS
24-hour battery life with case • Active noise-cancellation • Bluetooth 5.3 • IP57 ingress protection • 5.5g per bud • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/57252

VERDICT Much better active noise-cancellation than AirPods 2 and battery life is two hours longer

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE
Cambridge Audio Melomania A100 £119
Long battery life and incredible sound, even at low volumes

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Which bluetooth speakers are best for classical music?

Q I recently bought Majority's Folio Bluetooth Turntable (£169 from www.snipca.com/55096) and have been using some Bang & Olufsen earbuds with it. However, the sound produced by these and the turntable's own speakers isn't good enough for classical music. Are there any Bluetooth speakers you'd recommend? Do any come with tone control like my old (wired) JBL Creature II speakers?
Susan Platter

A The Sonos Era 100 (pictured) can really do justice to your vinyl. It's designed for stationary use, and can connect to your turntable via Bluetooth or to streaming services through Wi-Fi. Either way you get a wide, substantial and detailed stereo sound and you can adjust the equaliser (EQ) settings in the Sonos app. It costs £199, but Amazon recently discounted it to £168 (www.snipca.com/57232).

If that's too expensive, try the £100 Pure Classic Aura (www.snipca.com/57042, reviewed in Issue 724). With 40W of power it can fill a room, and the detailed output and spacious sound are perfect for symphonies or string quartets. You can also switch between three EQ presets at the touch of a button, though there aren't any tone controls as such.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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Mr and Mrs Davies Somerset

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Carol Doyle, Surrey

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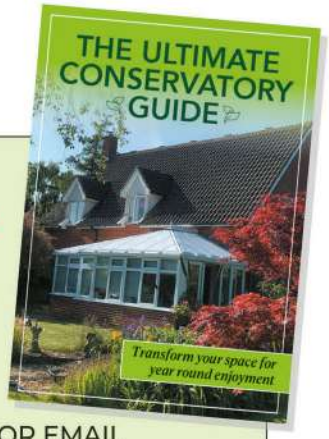
Anne Bird, Bristol



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TV-STREAMING BOX/GAMES CONSOLE | **£99** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57226

Netgem PLEIO

Freely provided

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

Freely attempts to do for streaming what Freeview did for digital TV, delivering all the channels from the UK's major broadcasters free through the internet to your TV set. So far it's had just one major problem. With no set-top box or TV stick to support the Freely platform, you needed a new smart TV to watch it. That changes with the Netgem PLEIO. This tiny puck-like streamer gives you Freely's 40 TV channels, plus the option to pay for an extra 150 ad-supported channels (see full list at www.snipca.com/57261) and even built-in game streaming.

> "First Freely box brings together broadcast and streaming TV in a simple interface"

Powered by Google's Android TV operating system, it also supports the Google Play Store. This means you can install Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV, Disney+ and Paramount+ apps, and have all your favourite TV available from one home screen.

For £99 you get the PLEIO puck (1 pictured above) plus a USB-C power adapter, a remote control 2, an HDMI cable and a Bluetooth game controller 3.

The puck is tiny, measuring just 64mm across and has only two sockets: an HDMI 2.1 port to connect to your TV and a USB-C port that's used solely for power. There's no Ethernet, but with Wi-Fi 6 built in we didn't have any problems with slow connections. The PLEIO can pass through a Dolby Atmos signal to a compatible TV, amplifier or soundbar, and it also supports DTS-HD and Dolby Digital 5.1 surround.

The interface is stripped back and deliberately simple, looking similar to what you might find on a modern smart TV. The home screen is dominated by your Freely services, with BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 all well represented, along with popular programmes from the U channels, including U&Dave and U&Yesterday.

You can watch live programmes through the 'Now on Freely' suggestions or via the TV guide, and scroll backwards through the guide to previous shows. Previous episodes are also accessible, while you can switch to other streaming apps with a couple of clicks on the remote control.

Picture quality is great, particularly on services like Paramount+, Apple TV+ and Netflix that support 4K content and HDR. There's no Dolby Vision support on the PLEIO yet, but HDR10 and HDR10+ are both present. Freely programmes max out at just 1080p resolution, but look fine.

Not everyone will want every PLEIO feature. The game-streaming platform and included controller give you access to a 250-strong library of games, but while there are some decent titles you won't find the big-name releases available on on Amazon Luna or Xbox Cloud Gaming. The gamepad also feels cheap compared with the standard Xbox or PlayStation controllers. Plus, while the extra channels and the gaming are free for the first three months, you'll need to pay £9.99 a month for a PLEIO membership once that's over.

Other Freely boxes should be on their way soon and there's a good chance that, minus the bundled gaming features and controller, there will be cheaper options. Also, recordable Freely boxes might arrive next year, but these will be more expensive.

Right now, however, the PLEIO is the only way to bring Freely to your existing TV. It gives you the best of the broadcast and streaming worlds in one simple interface, and all at a reasonable price. There's clearly demand – the PLEIO sold out within days, with new stock arriving soon.

SPECIFICATIONS

Up to 4K (3840x2160-pixel) resolution • 60fps • HDR10/HDR10+ • HDMI • USB-C port for power • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.0 • 14x64x64mm • 40g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/57226

VERDICT No-frills hardware and a clean interface bring your streaming services and favourite broadcast channels together in style

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Sky Stream From £15 a month Every major UK channel plus Netflix and all Sky content through a compact streaming box

TV STREAMING STICK | **£50** from Amazon www.snipca.com/57247

Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K Select

Down stream

Amazon pitches the Fire TV Stick 4K Select as an option for 'essential 4K streaming', slotting in between the basic Fire TV Stick HD and the Fire TV Stick 4K. The £10 saving over the latter means losing support for Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos, but the bigger story here is that the Select ditches Amazon's old Android-based Fire OS software in favour of the new Linux-based Vega OS.

> "It's less flexible and lacks the features of previous versions"

Physically, there's not much difference between the Stick 4K and Stick 4K Select. It's another slim dongle with rounded corners (14mm thick and 99mm long) with a microUSB port for connecting the external power supply and an HDMI connector for plugging into your TV. It features a similar Alexa Voice Remote to the Fire TV Stick 4K, only slightly more rounded, and has the same basic hardware – a quad-core MediaTek processor and 1GB of RAM.

The new operating system looks and feels much like the old one, pushing Amazon content but still showcasing the best from Netflix and other streaming services. It's also very easy to set up. Once you've entered your network details, you just need to download and sign into your favourite streaming apps. Keep a smartphone handy and you can do this quickly using QR codes.

Once up and running, it's not always slick and snappy, sometimes taking a good 10 seconds to launch, say, the Netflix or Disney+ app. Still, in our tests it wasn't any slower than the Fire TV Stick 4K Max, and sometimes started playing 4K content half a second faster.

Video and audio quality is impressive, both with 4K and HD content, and while it doesn't have Dolby Vision HDR, we found that HDR10+ still held up well on our LG OLED TV.

However, none of these compensate for its serious flaws. The slower Wi-FI 5 connection means it can take 15 seconds or longer before the video stream switches from a rough-looking SD stream to 1080p or 4K. More seriously, the Vega OS runs apps from Amazon's cloud services rather than installing them on the device itself. This means you don't get the full range of apps and games available on older sticks, while both Amazon's Luna game streaming and Xbox cloud streaming have yet to come online. Worse, there's no way to sideload Android apps, though you can now install VPNs (see page 7).

No sideloading isn't a problem if all you want to do is stream films and TV, and there are some apps such as Plex for accessing a media server in your home. Yet you're getting a device that's not as flexible as previous Fire TV sticks, and that actually does less.

SPECIFICATIONS:
Quad-core MediaTek MT8690 processor • 1GB RAM • 8GB storage • Up to 4K (3840x2160-pixel) resolution • 60fps • HDR10/HDR10+ • Integrated HDMI Plus • MicroUSB for power • Wi-Fi 5 • Bluetooth 5.0 • 14x30x99mm (WxDxH) • 46.2g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/57247

VERDICT Decent 4K streaming spoilt by lack of sideloading option and poor app support

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Roku Streaming Stick+ £40
This basic 4K streaming stick is better value, snappier and ad-free

DO I REALLY NEED...

A large rolling TV/tablet?

What is it?
The Samsung Movingstyle is a 27in smart screen that can work as a TV or a massive tablet. You don't have to hold it, though. It moves around the room on its own rollable, height-adjustable floorstand (pictured).

What does it do?
It works like a normal Samsung Smart TV, but has a touchscreen for running games, and health and education apps. It'll also stream Xbox games through the Samsung Gaming Hub, while you can connect your phone or laptop either wirelessly or with an HDMI cable.

What's the catch?
It has a built-in kickstand if you want to lug just the screen around, but does it make any sense to anyone, unless you're spending a lot of time in bed? Oh, and it costs a cool £1,200 (www.snipca.com/57255).

So can I do without it?
No, unless you like a lie-in until Christmas is over.

NEXT ISSUE

On Sale Weds 31 Dec

Alienware 16X Aurora
Gaming laptop that's not just for gamers

Amazon Echo Dot Max
Alexa speaker looks great but is the sound any good?

These and much more...

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Don't get scammed – stay safe with Norton

As online frauds soar, you need Norton to stay safe across all your devices

We all know about the dangers of malware, but today's biggest online threat isn't viruses – it's scams. While computers and smartphones are increasingly resistant to viruses, cybercriminals have switched to different methods, using deception to trick you into giving up your sensitive personal information and even your money. According to the latest figures, individuals in the UK lost more than £620 million to scams in the first half of 2025, and two thirds of those scams originated online.

> "Brits lost more than £620 million to scams in the first half of 2025"

Anyone can be a victim. Just click a link in a realistic-looking phishing email, unwittingly place an order on a fraudulent shopping site or respond to a seemingly innocent text message, and you could be in the hands of a scammer.

Sometimes, if you keep your wits about you, it's possible to spot a swindle. A web page might contain unprofessional typos, or a text message might come from the wrong phone number. It could ask you to do something suspicious, such as sharing your password or transferring money. A particular red flag is if someone asks you to send untraceable currency such as gift cards or bitcoins, rather than using a trustworthy payment service.

But no matter how careful you are, it's easy to get caught out. Scammers use tricks to make you respond in haste: a popular tactic is to send a message claiming you'll be locked out of your online accounts or required to pay a fine unless you take urgent action. Or, they may try to lure you in with the promise of a cash prize, or government benefits. It's easy to be swept along, without stopping to consider the risks.

And even if you do everything right, it's not always possible to spot a well-tailored scam. You're up against professional, full-time criminals who can craft realistic-looking messages and fake websites that even experts struggle to tell apart from the real thing. You could even be tricked by digitally manipulated "deepfake" videos that look like a celebrity or trusted public figure giving advice – when in fact it's a computer-generated image giving you bogus information.

Norton keeps you safe

It's scary to realise how many threats are out there – but you don't need to face them alone. Norton is one of the world's best-known antivirus and security brands, and its software now includes multiple technologies designed specifically to protect you from scams.

For example, Norton's Safe Web technology (pictured above right) doesn't just warn you away from known untrustworthy sites. It uses real-time AI-assisted analysis, trained on millions of real-world scam attempts, to recognise even "zero-day" phishing and fraud attempts that have never been seen before, and raise the alarm before you give away your data or your bank details.

Scam Protection
norton
Fake sites exposed
Norton Safe Web spots scam sites before you enter a password or click on a trap.
Safe Web

Norton's Safe Web uses AI analysis to recognise scams and warn you about them

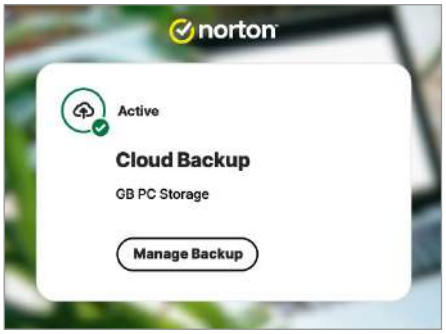
It's a whole new dimension of protection that traditional URL filters can't match, and it's all automatic – scams are shut down without you needing to lift a finger.

Norton can also analyse videos on YouTube and social media, and alert you to possible deepfakes. You might believe you're watching Martin Lewis give financial advice, but Norton can spot the digital signatures of AI video editing and computer-synthesised speech, and warn you that all is not as it seems. (Deepfake detection features may vary on different device platforms).

WHERE TO BUY NORTON

Whether it's for a single device or a busy family home, Norton 360 provides all the protection you need in one convenient package.

And *Computeractive* readers can take advantage of some fantastic discounts: visit https:store.computeractive.co.uk to get protected from just £9.99 for 15 months – or choose the Norton 360 Premium package and protect 10 devices for two years for just £15.99, an amazing 91% off the RRP of £179.99.

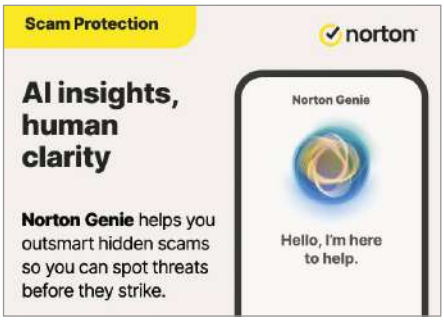


All Norton 360 packages include cloud backup for your Windows PCs

Forearm yourself against mobile scams

As well as attacking traditional PCs and laptops, scammers have your smartphone in their sights. UK Finance report that 17 per cent of scam attacks start with unsolicited text messages or fake calls, typically pretending to be from your bank or mobile provider. That's why Norton's mobile app for Android and iOS also includes a custom-trained database of scam indicators, enabling it to instantly scan incoming communications and warn you if anything looks suspicious.

The app now features Norton's unique Genie assistant (pictured below) – an interactive AI-powered helper that can give instant advice and information about scams. If you have any concerns about something you've seen online, Genie can analyse web pages, tell you what to look out for, highlight the risks and provide either reassurance or a warning not to proceed. It can also answer any other questions you may have about general cybersecurity, and how to get the best from your Norton software.


Scam Protection
norton
AI insights, human clarity
Norton Genie helps you outsmart hidden scams so you can spot threats before they strike.
Norton Genie
Hello, I'm here to help.

Norton's interactive assistant Genie gives advice and information about scams

360-degree protection

Alongside its anti-scam capabilities, Norton 360 offers complete protection against all kinds of online attack. Independent testers at AV-Test have awarded Norton perfect marks for antivirus protection, performance and usability in multiple tests throughout 2025, so you can be confident it'll protect you from Trojans, ransomware and other malware threats – without getting in your way or slowing your computer down (see https://av-test.org).

VPN for privacy
Bank-grade encryption keeps your browsing private on your devices when you're on-the-go.
Secure Network
norton

Norton's VPN gives you unlimited data and a choice of secure servers around the world

The suite also includes the Norton VPN (pictured above), with unlimited data and a choice of secure servers around the world to keep your connection private and secure. This ensures no one can spy on your activity and steal your personal data, even when you're using an unprotected Wi-Fi hotspot.

You also benefit from Norton's extensive behind-the-scenes Dark Web Monitoring, which continually scours the internet for leaked and stolen personal information. Ordinarily, if your data falls into nefarious hands, you won't know anything about it until you fall victim to a phishing attack or an attempted login hack. With Norton, you'll get an alert as soon as your information is found on the "dark web", so you can change passwords, update your profiles right away, and be on your guard against fraud attempts.

What's more, all Norton 360 packages include cloud backup for your Windows PCs (pictured above right), allowing you to store copies of your critical files safely on Norton's secure file servers. It's bulletproof protection against malware or mishaps, and can even save your bacon if your laptop is lost or stolen – everything is ready to be recovered in a few clicks.

A suite for everyone

These powerful anti-scam and antivirus protections are integrated into Norton 360 Standard, the cost-effective security suite available for Windows, macOS, Android, iOS and iPadOS – check the Norton website (www.norton.com) for full details of which features are available on which platforms.

For all-round peace of mind, the Norton 360 Deluxe suite extends your coverage across up to five devices. That lets you share your protection with relatives who might be susceptible to online tricks and deceptions, or with kids who don't fully appreciate the dangers that lurk online. The Deluxe edition also includes Norton's parental controls (pictured below), which let parents manage and monitor what kids are doing on their personal computers and mobile devices.

Norton 360 Deluxe includes parental controls

And for the most wide-ranging protection, Norton 360 Advanced covers 10 devices of any type, and includes a huge total of 200GB of cloud storage – plus automatic detection of scam emails and phone calls. For gaming enthusiasts, Norton 360 for Gamers provides protection against scams and malware for up to three devices, while Norton's custom Game Optimiser tool automatically suspends resource-hungry background programs while you're playing, to give you the smoothest, most immersive gaming experience with minimal lag.

Buy It

Find out which other products we liked. Buy our 2024 **Back Issue CD**: £19 from **www.snipca.com/53433**

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

MSI Prestige A16 AI+
£1,056 from www.snipca.com/57323
Tested Issue 718

A powerful Copilot+ laptop with 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD to guarantee fast performance. Screen is excellent too, while battery lasts an impressive 17 hours.

ALTERNATIVE PCSpecialist 16 Fusion British-made laptop with superb screen and built for advanced AI tasks. £969 from www.snipca.com/55094

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £758 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 11
£329 from www.snipca.com/54887
Tested Issue 711

With a faster processor and increased storage (from 64GB to 128GB), the 2025 edition of the iPad is simply stunning. Battery life is over 11 hours, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

OnePlus Pad 3
£549 from www.snipca.com/55302
Tested Issue 714

With an incredibly fast processor and stunning 13.2in screen, this is the best ever Android tablet, and rivals the iPad Air. At launch both the 12GB RAM/256GB and 16GB/512GB versions were £529, so grab the latter as soon as possible.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £584 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£699 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £495 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

Samsung Galaxy A56
£493 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £460 from www.snipca.com/56073

MINI PC

Wired2Fire AMD R8845
£680 from www.snipca.com/56881
Tested Issue 723

Outstandingly fast machine, with 32GB DDR5 RAM and a 2TB SSD. You can easily add a second SSD by unscrewing the case. Has all the ports you need and measures just 53x135x127mm (HxWxD).

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox K11 Speedy, powerful and easily upgradeable, with an OCuLink connection for graphics cards. £595 from www.snipca.com/54341

EBOOK READER

PRICE DROP

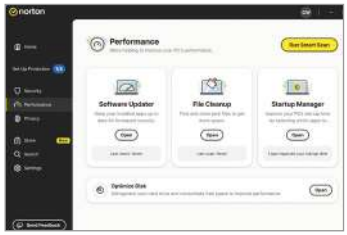
Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£125 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £180 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£9.99 from www.snipca.com/56927
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, 15-month licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Obsbot Meet SE
£79 from www.snipca.com/54725
Tested Issue 710

The Meet SE from Chinese firm Obsbot beats the picture quality of our previous favourite, Logitech's C925e. Colours are vibrant and accurate, with terrific detail even in poor lighting thanks to a relatively wide aperture.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £45 from www.snipca.com/56585

PC MONITOR

PRICE DROP

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£184 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£98 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £98; 2TB costs £215.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £80 from www.snipca.com/56926

Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the **Buy It** award

COMPETITION

Win 2TB and 1TB LaCie Rugged SSD4 portable drives

Winner of a Recommend award in Issue 722 (page 29), LaCie's Rugged SSD4 portable drive has an adventure-proof design, with an IP54 ingress rating that withstands water, dust and drops of three metres.

It supports USB 4.0 and Thunderbolt 5, serving up a maximum speed of 40Gbps (4,000Mbps) for rapid transfers wherever you are. It works straight out of the box thanks to USB-C connectivity with macOS, iPadOS, iOS, Windows, ChromeOS, Android and gaming-console systems.

Its dimensions are 67x106x106mm (HxWxD) and it weighs 108 grams. Backup software is included.

The winner of this competition will win a 2TB SSD4, while one runner-up will win a 1TB SSD4. To enter, answer the question at www.snipca.com/57049 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 30 December. Good luck!

You can buy LaCie's Rugged SSD4 drives for £204 (1TB, www.snipca.com/56723); £420 (2TB, www.snipca.com/56724); and £600 (4TB, www.snipca.com/56725). For more information on LaCie's products visit www.snipca.com/57050.

PRINTER

PRICE DROP

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£145 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £129 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB
£180 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Sharp GM6245K
Has a fantastic 43in screen with superb contrast, and 4K content looks especially detailed. Comes with TiVo for paid-for streaming and Freely for free live channels and catch-up. £230 from www.snipca.com/55940

ROUTER

TP-Link Archer BE550
£170 from www.snipca.com/55981
Tested Issue 718

This tri-band router is the first Wi-Fi 7 model to be our top choice. It had enough bandwidth across our test house to stream six 4K movies simultaneously, and has five 2.5Gbps Ethernet ports.

ALTERNATIVE Asus RT-AXE7800
Our previous favourite is also tri-band, but only on Wi-Fi 6E. That still delivers incredibly fast speeds that stretched deep into our test house. £133 from www.snipca.com/52957

Workshops & Tips

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

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40 Readers' Tips
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HOW TO...

Build a home security system for under £20

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Security camera **Time required:** 45 minutes

Home-security systems can be complicated and expensive. You can spend money on proximity and movement sensors; door and window contacts; and multiple cameras running from a central hub. But if you don't want a full surveillance setup, you can still strengthen your security with a single camera and the right software. One camera won't cover every entry point, but positioned well it can watch over key possessions and alert you to unexpected movement.

A camera like this can be cheaper than you think, and most models come with apps that are easy to use. However, these apps may lock you into the manufacturer's online storage or insist on saving videos to an onboard SD card that you can only access through the app. That's not ideal if you want full control over how you manage and review your footage.

To make the most of a single camera, you'll need to go beyond the app and manage the footage yourself. We'll explain how to do this with the TP-Link Tapo C110 camera (pictured above right), which has a full price of £24.99 but was only £15.99 when we last checked on Amazon (www.snipca.com/57230).

It has a decent three-megapixel resolution with a wide field of vision, automatic night vision and Wi-Fi connectivity. If that doesn't quite fit the bill, there are plenty of similarly priced alternatives from other manufacturers.

Whichever camera you choose, pick one with a hard-wired power supply rather than a battery. Battery-only models can run for weeks or months if they only "wake up" on movement, but for total security you don't want to risk the camera running out of power at the vital moment.

The other essential requirement is RTSP (Real-Time Streaming Protocol) support. This streaming standard, created in 1996, is still widely used to control streaming media servers. It lets you stream footage to any device on your home network and record it, without being tied to a specific online service. The trade-off is that turning on RTSP often disables other built-in features. For example, the Tapo C110 can upload to TP-Link's online storage or record to a microSD card, but can't do either while RTSP is active.

1 Set up the camera

Our instructions will be for the Tapo C110, but they'll be similar for whichever camera you buy. First, install the free Tapo app on your phone – you'll find links for Android and iOS by visiting www.snipca.com/57231 and scrolling to the bottom. Launch the app then tap the '+' icon at the top of the screen, followed by Add Device. Now tap Indoor Cameras, then Tapo C110.

Plug in the camera and wait for the lights beneath the lens to flash red and green. Then return to the app and tap 'Already Red and Green'. Next, open your phone's Wi-Fi settings and join the network starting with 'Tapo_Cam_'. In our screenshot the camera appears as Tapo_Cam_A0F2.

Set up your camera by connecting your phone to its wireless network

Once your phone is connected to the camera, return to the Tapo app. Don't worry if your phone warns you there's no internet connection – the camera isn't yet

on your router. The app will ask which Wi-Fi network to connect the camera to. Like most network cameras, the Tapo C110 only supports 2.4GHz networks, but you can still access it from 5GHz devices connected to the same router, as long as the 2.4GHz network isn't isolated as a guest network or reserved for other smart devices like doorbells and lights.

You'll know when the camera has connected to your network, as it will say 'Wi-Fi connected' out loud. Now give the camera a meaningful name, specify the room in which you're using it, and assign it an icon.

If you want to save footage to a microSD card as well as stream it over your network, insert the card now. TP-Link recommends Class 10 or higher, with 8GB–512GB of storage. To avoid compatibility problems, insert the card and let the app automatically set it up for your camera, rather than formatting it yourself on your computer.

2 Turn on RTSP

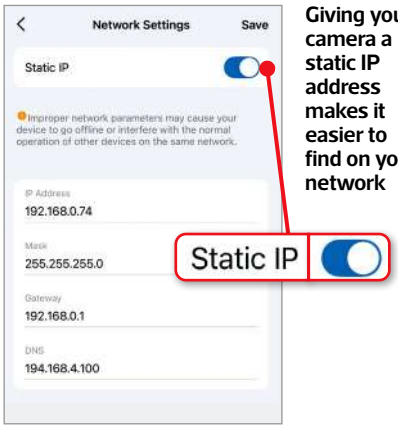
Tap your camera's name in the Tapo app to check it's working. After a few alerts as the camera powers up you'll see a live view.

To let other devices and apps access the stream, set up a separate username and password for the camera. To do this, open the camera's settings by tapping the nut icon, followed by Advanced Settings then Camera Account. When the warning appears, tap 'Understand and Agree' and set your credentials. For better security, use a different username and password from your Tapo account. Remember them, as you'll need them later.

You've now done all you need to do to view your camera's output via RTSP, as long as you know where to find it on your local network. You can find the camera's IP address by going into your router's management interface and browsing the attached devices. If you're using the Tapo camera, you'll see its address alongside the name 'C110' (see screenshot below).

You can use this address to view the stream on your home network, but if your network uses DHCP, the address may change over time, causing problems. To prevent this, 'reserve' the IP address in your router's settings so it's always assigned to the same device. You can also set a static IP address in the Tapo app by opening the camera's settings, going to Advanced Settings, then Network Settings, switching on Static IP (see screenshot left), and tapping Save without changing the other settings.

It's essential that you close the Tapo app at this point because if it's still communicating with the camera in the background, you may not be able to open the RTSP stream in any other application.



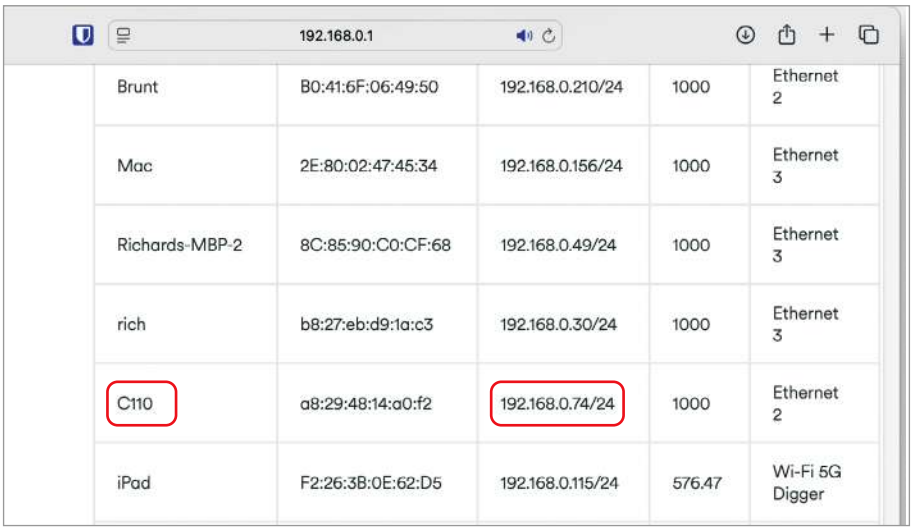
Giving your camera a static IP address makes it easier to find on your network

3 View your camera stream remotely

Now it's time to test the remote stream. There are dozens of programs that can show RTSP video, but we've chosen VLC as it's freely available for Windows, macOS and Linux. Install it from www.videolan.org/vlc, then launch it and press Ctrl+N to open a new network stream.

Now enter the following address rtsp://192.168.0.74:554/stream2, replacing the IP address (192.168.0.74) with the address of your camera on your local network, but keep the port number at the end (:554) – this is the standard connection method for RTSP streams. The Tapo supports three stream types, with stream1 offering the highest quality and stream3 using the least bandwidth. We've chosen stream2, which is a good compromise for home-security purposes.

When VLC asks for your credentials, enter the username and password you set for the camera account, not your Tapo account details. When VLC plays the stream you'll also hear any audio from the camera's microphone, such as people talking. They won't hear you, though, because while the Tapo has a small built-in speaker, the RTSP connection doesn't allow two-way communication.



Our Tapo C110 camera has been assigned the IP address 192.168.0.74

How I Use security cameras

I have several off-the-shelf cameras around my home, most of which store footage on an SD card should I ever need to retrieve it later. However, one in my office feeds a live view of my plotter, so I can see if it's run into trouble or needs a new pen without me running upstairs to check in person.

Nik Rawlinson

How have you set up your home-security system? Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

4 Embed your feed in a web page

If you don't want to keep running VLC and entering your login credentials, you can embed the camera stream in a web page. Most browsers can't play RTSP streams directly, so use WebRTC (Web Real-Time Communication) instead. This technology lets you stream video online without plug-ins, but you'll have to set it up yourself.

You'll need to store WebRTC files and settings in a 'container' provided by the software Docker. This avoids clutter on your Windows drive or the registry, and makes it easy to add more cameras later. On Windows, install Docker from the Microsoft Store (www.snipca.com/57233).

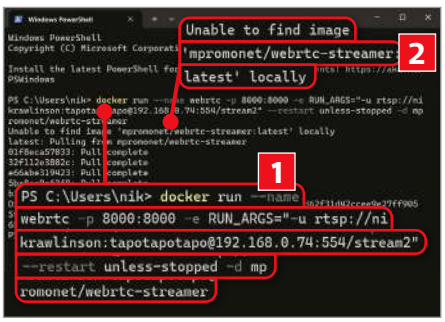
After installation, reboot and let Windows install or update the Windows Subsystem for Linux (WSL), which Docker needs. This may take some time. Once Docker is running, wait a few seconds until the status line at the bottom of the Docker sidebar shows 'Engine running'.

Now launch PowerShell from the Windows menu and enter the following as a single line, replacing 'username', 'password', and 'IP_address' with the camera credentials and IP address you set in the Tapo app. Leave the rest of the command unchanged:

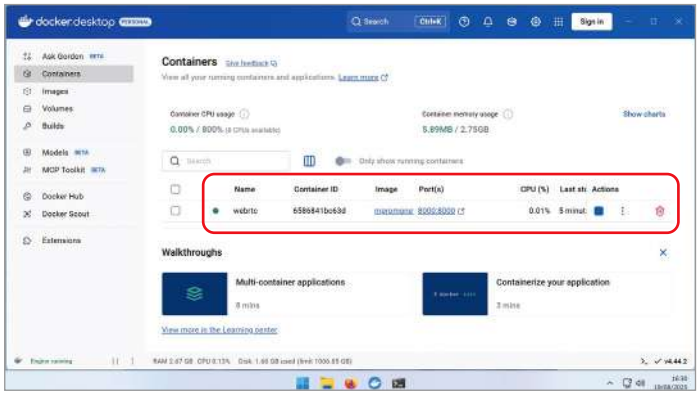
```
docker run --name webrtc -p 8000:8000 -e RUN_ARGS="-u rtsp://username:password@IP_address:554/stream2" --restart unless-stopped -d mpromonet/webrtc-streamer
```

Our screenshot below shows this command in full 1. You can copy it from our Pastebin account (www.snipca.com/57234). PowerShell may warn that 'mpromonet/webrtc-streamer' isn't installed locally 2, but it will still automatically download and install all necessary components.

When it's completed, you'll see a new container in the Docker dashboard (see screenshot above right, top of page). This



Type this command into PowerShell to set up Docker on your computer



The Docker container is now shown in our dashboard

Type the URL using your username, password and IP address and you'll see your camera's stream in your browser

is where the streaming service lives.

You can now view the video feed in a web browser, via WebRTC. Open a new browser window and visit http://localhost:8000/webrtcstreamer.html?video=rtsp://username:password@IP_address:554/stream2. Copy this from our Pastebin account (www.snipca.com/57235). Again, replace the username, password and IP address with your credentials, but leave the port (:554) and the local address (localhost:8000) unchanged. You'll see our version of this URL 1 in our screenshot above. When the page loads, you should immediately see the stream from your camera 2.

5 View the stream on other computers

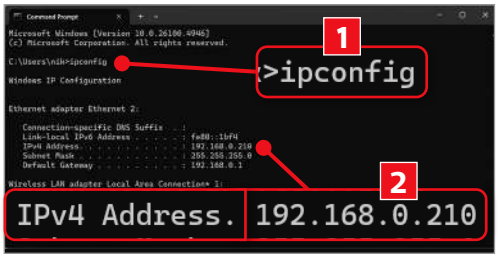
You can view the stream on other computers on your local network by replacing 'localhost' in the URL with the IP address of the PC running Docker. To find it, open a Command Prompt then type ipconfig (1 in our screenshot right) and look for the entry beside 'IPv4 Address:' (for example, 192.168.0.210 2). Use this address in place of 'localhost' to access the stream from another device on the same network.

To monitor the feed from beyond your home network, you'll need to set up port forwarding to send any incoming connections to the PC managing your stream, or to the camera itself. How you do this depends on your router, so check its documentation. You need to redirect incoming HTTP/HTTPS requests to the PC running Docker, which will need to stay switched on and awake around the clock. Again, it's a good idea to give it a static IP address, because if an automatically assigned address changes you won't be able to look it up remotely.

6 Record footage from your camera

Recording the feed lets you review suspicious incidents and keep a copy of the evidence. If you have a NAS drive, it may handle this directly: Synology's Surveillance Station (www.snipca.com/57236) supports nearly 9,000 IP cameras; offers mobile access; and can trigger alerts for unexpected motion. QNAP's QVR Client Pro (www.snipca.com/57237) works on its NAS devices and Windows/macOS.

If you don't have a NAS drive, try using a spare PC. Security Eye (www.snipca.com/57238) is free, supports scheduled recording, and can alert by email or text message. Alternatively, iSpy (www.snipca.com/57239) has very low system requirements – 2GB RAM and 200GB drive space – and can host up to four cameras at a modest resolution.



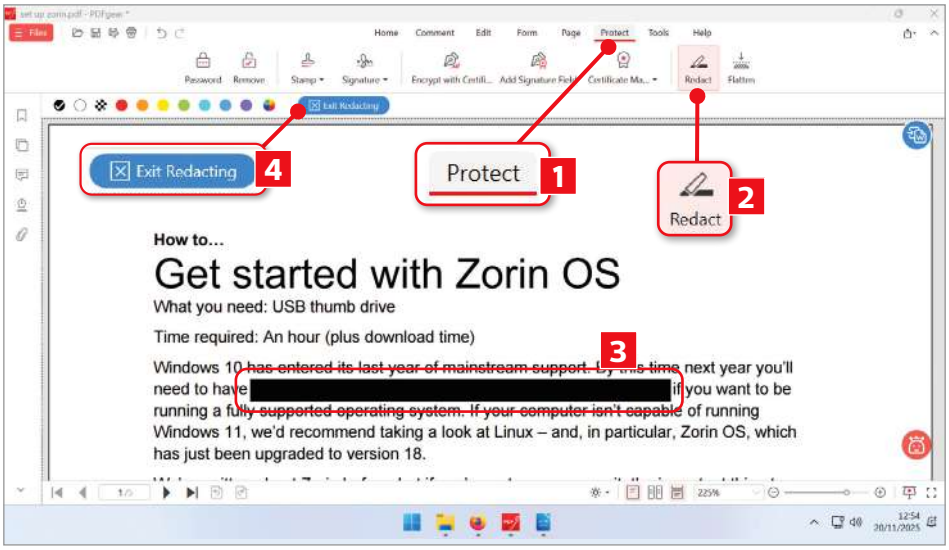
Use Command Prompt to find the IP address of the computer running Docker

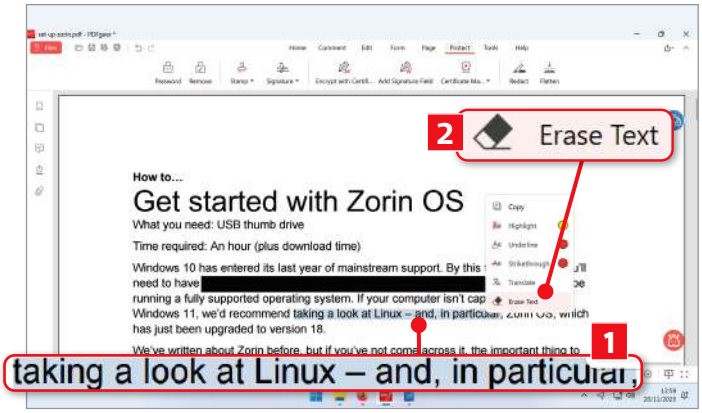
Redact sensitive information from PDFs

What you need: PDFgear
Time required: 30 minutes

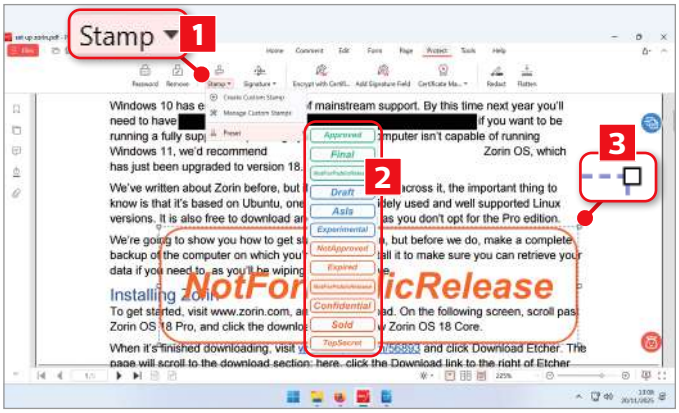
PDF gear is one of our favourite free tools. It's a PDF reader, creator and editor all in one, and it's just received a significant update (version 2.1.13). This latest release introduces smart tools that let you redact sensitive information and re-save the PDF so that data can't be retrieved by anyone you share it with. This will come in very handy whenever you need to share documents that contain details of online accounts, banking data, medical information and more. To follow our Workshop explaining how to do this, first download a copy of PDFgear from www.pdfgear.com.

STEP 1 To redact text that you don't want others to read, open the file you want to edit, then click Protect 1. Next, click Redact 2 and PDFgear will warn you that redacted content will be permanently removed. If you'll ever need to refer to it in future, make sure you make a copy of your original document. Click OK, then click and drag across the document to put a border around the area you want to obscure. When you let go of your mouse button, PDFgear will cover that area with a black box 3. When you've finished, click Exit Redacting 4.

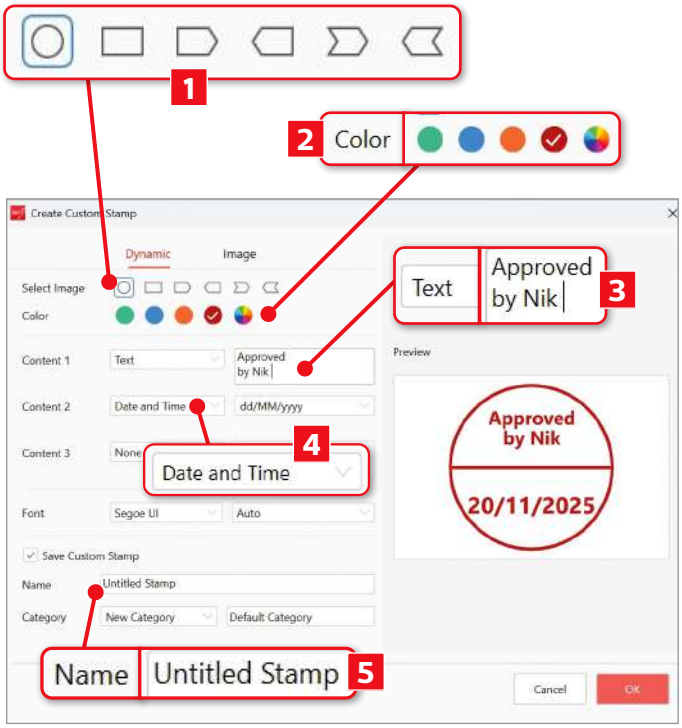

Exit Redacting
4
Protect
1
Redact
2
How to...
Get started with Zorin OS
What you need: USB thumb drive
Time required: An hour (plus download time)
3
Windows 10 has entered its last year of mainstream support. By this time next year you'll need to have
if you want to be running a fully supported operating system. If your computer isn't capable of running Windows 11, we'd recommend taking a look at Linux – and, in particular, Zorin OS, which has just been upgraded to version 18.


2
Erase Text
How to...
Get started with Zorin OS
What you need: USB thumb drive
Time required: An hour (plus download time)
Windows 10 has entered its last year of mainstream support. By this
need to have
running a fully supported operating system. If your computer isn't cap
Windows 11, we'd recommend taking a look at Linux – and, in particular,
has just been upgraded to version 18.
We've written about Zorin before, but if you've not come across it, the important thing to
1
taking a look at Linux – and, in particular,

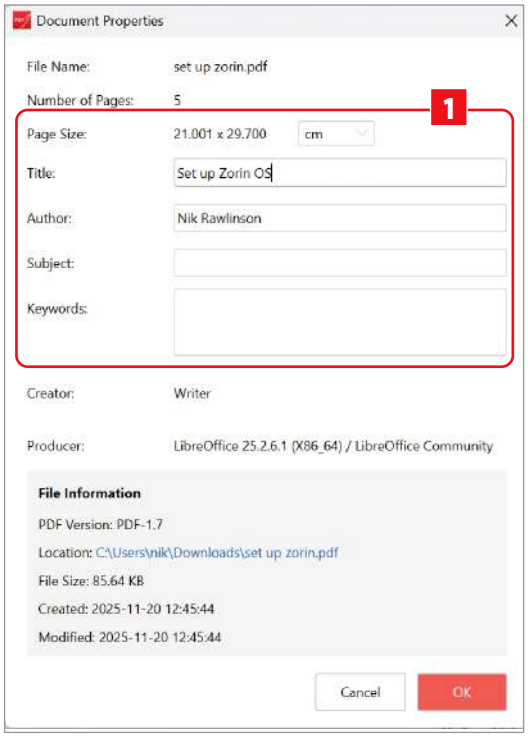
STEP 2 Whenever you redact text, it's clear to anyone reading the document that something is missing or hidden. However, you can instead erase text. While this leaves a gap in the text, it may not be obvious if it appears at the end of a paragraph or you remove an item entirely, such as a caption below a photo. To do this, highlight the text you want to remove 1, then right-click it and click Erase Text 2 in the menu that appears.


Stamp
1
2
3
Windows 10 has e
mainstream support. By this time next year you'll
need to have
if you want to be
running a fully sup
mputer isn't capable of running
Windows 11, we'd recommend
Zorin OS, which
has just been upgraded to version 18.
We've written about Zorin before, but
across it, the important thing to
know is that it's based on Ubuntu, one
ely used and well supported Linux
versions. It is also free to download ar
as you don't opt for the Pro edition.
We're going to show you how to get st
, but before we do, make a complete
backup of the computer on which you
all it to make sure you can retrieve your
data if you need to, as you'll be wiping
e.
Installing Zorin
To get started, visit www.zorin.com, a
ad. On the following screen, scroll pas
Zorin OS 18 Pro, and click the downlo
Zorin OS 18 Core.
When it's finished downloading, visit y
and click Download Etcher. This
page will scroll to the download section; here, click the Download link to the right of Etcher
Approved
Final
Draft
Asis
Experimental
NotApproved
Expired
Confidential
Sold
TopSecret

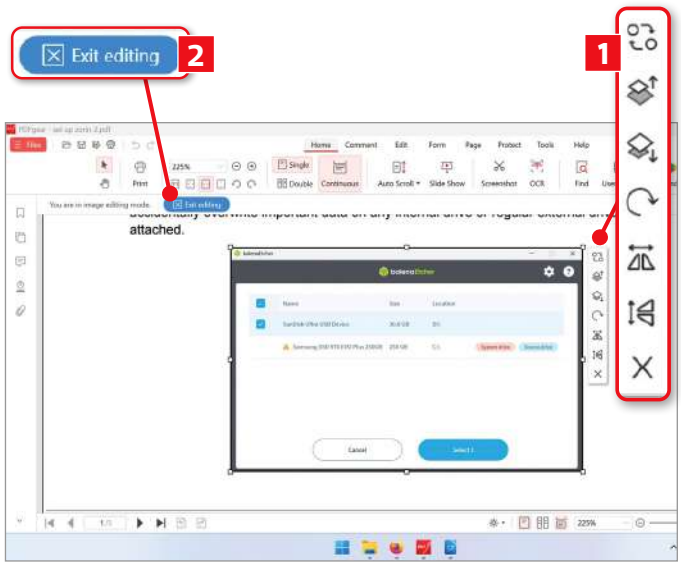
STEP 3 If you're sharing the document with a collaborator that you trust, you may not want to remove sensitive information and instead make sure they're aware it shouldn't be passed on to others. In this case, click Stamp 1, followed by one of the default graphics on the Preset menu 2. This will be placed on top of the document, and can be resized by dragging the grab handles on the corners and edges 3.



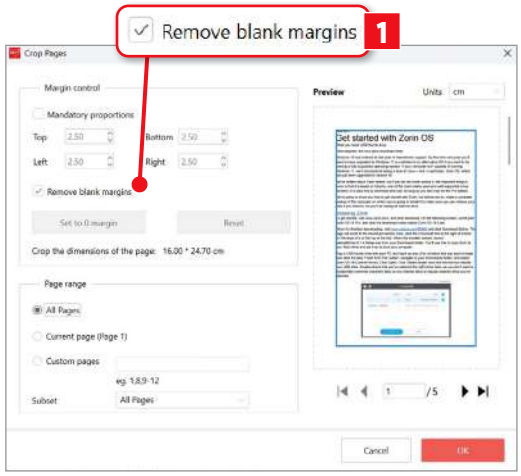
STEP 4 If none of the default stamps meet your needs, create your own. Click 'Stamp', followed by Create Custom Stamp, then select a border 1, colour 2 and the text you want to include 3. Use the dropdown menus to select variables, like the date and time 4, which will update automatically so they are always correct whenever the stamp is used on your document. When you've finished, give it a name 5 then click OK.



STEP 5 Some of the metadata attached to your PDF might identify who created it. This may have been added by the word processor or other program used to produce it in the first place. If you don't want to share this information, you can remove it. Either right-click the open file inside PDFgear, or press Ctrl+D to open the Document Properties box. Now click in the individual boxes 1 and remove the contents of any that contain information you'd rather not share.



STEP 6 The latest release of PDFgear also introduces new tools for editing photos on a PDF. Click the photo you want to work with, then click the pencil icon at the top of the narrow menu that appears. This opens a full range of editing tools 1 with which you can rotate or flip it, and change whether the image appears above or below other objects on the page. When you've made the changes you want, click 'Exit editing' 2.



STEP 7 You can also crop pages, effectively removing entire sections of individual sheets or a batch of sheets. This can be helpful if you want to remove a header or footer – for example, if it contains outdated information or elements like page numbers that are irrelevant to your file. Switch to the Pages tab and click Crop, then drag across the area you want to keep. When you release the button, the Crop Pages box appears. Use this to refine the selection. We're using the handy 'Remove blank margins' option 1 to strip down every page to only the content that matters.

Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Include 'out of stock' items in Amazon searches

Issue 723's Cover Feature on Amazon should help me find well-priced stocking-fillers this Christmas. I was already a regular shopper on its Renewed section (www.snipca.com/56830), where I've bought refurbished tablets, laptops and phones in the past. They've all worked well.

One tip that helps me check if I'm getting a good price is ticking the 'Include Out of Stock' box (see screenshot right). This makes sense because items that are temporarily unavailable often go back on sale soon after. It means I can then shop on other renewed sites to see if they're offering a decent price.

The box you need to tick is under the Availability heading on the left, at the bottom of the long list of filters. The other filter I use a lot is 'Free UK Delivery by Amazon', right at the top.

Mark Newell

Mark wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433

SECURITY

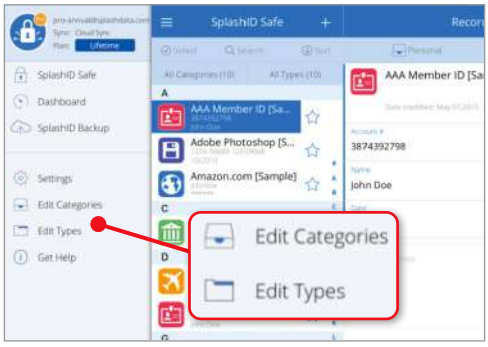
Keep passwords in digital filing cabinets

I was interested to read Issue 720's Cover Feature on password managers, but was disappointed in your Gold award winner Bitwarden (https://bitwarden.com). I found it quite restrictive and inflexible, as were a couple of others you mentioned that I tried.

I was also disappointed that you didn't review my personal favourite, Splash ID Safe (www.snipca.com/57155), which I've used for 20 years. It offers much more than a password manager. You can use it to store details about everything in your life, from the size of your car's tyres to the shade of paint you used to decorate a room. It's like a digital filing cabinet in which you can customise your Categories (like the drawers in a filing cabinet) and your Types (like the folders in each drawer – see screenshot left). Then within each folder you can customise anything you want.

A long time ago I bought a lifetime licence at a very reasonable rate, though SplashID has since released two more up-to-date products: Pro 9 and Classic (https://blog.splashid.com).

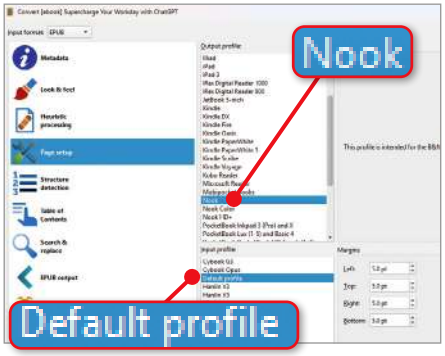
Dave Lee



EBOOKS

Convert EPUB files to read on old Nook e-readers

Steve Law had a query in Issue 723 (page 68) about using his old Nook BNRV350 ebook reader. I also use an old Nook – the Simple Touch, released in 2011. However, before transferring EPUB books to the Nook, I run them through Calibre (https://calibre-ebook.com) in a



Why I stopped using...

Organic Maps

Organic Maps is a great app and I can understand why lots of readers have switched to it from Google Maps, including Graham Hodge in Issue 722. But plenty of developers don't like the way it's going – see the open letter they wrote at www.snipca.com/57150. They complained about a lack of "transparency" and think the app might switch from open-source principles to making a profit.

And what I use instead...

As a result I decided to try a forked version of Organic Maps called **CoMaps** (www.snipca.com/57153).

It's available for both Android and iOS, and its developers pledge that it will always be free and will never track your activity to show adverts. You can tell it's based on Organic Maps. Its design and features are similar, and mapping data comes from OpenStreetMap.

To see the options to customise it, tap the three horizontal lines then Settings (see screenshot). The setting I always disable on maps is 3D buildings. They're so distracting. I don't know why they're turned on by default.

Dennis Clough

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

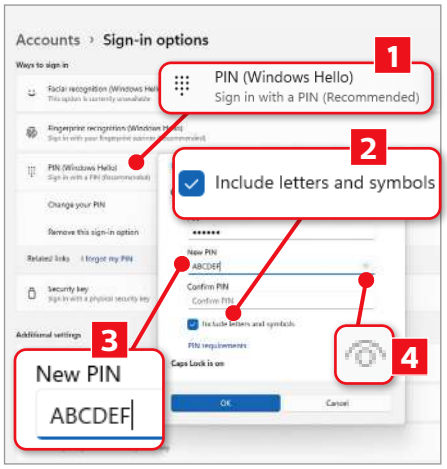
pre-set Nook format (see screenshot below left). I then transfer the converted files to the Nook and achieve far better results than when transferring the original EPUB files directly. In particular, page turns are faster and ghosting is eliminated.

Phillip Sear

SECURITY

Use letters for your Windows Hello PIN

In your 'What's the difference between?' explanation of passwords, passkeys, passcodes and PINs (Issue 721, page 69), you don't seem to be aware that the Windows Hello PIN can be alphabetical. Like the reader you replied to (John Clarke) I thought an alphabetical PIN would be more secure and easier to remember – so I tried it and it worked. I use a PIN of 13 letters with no problem.



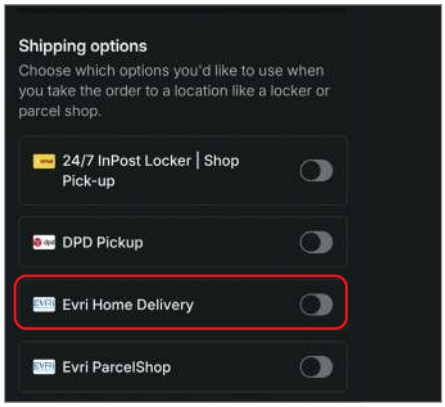
To change your PIN to letters, press Windows key+I to open Settings, then Accounts followed by 'Sign-in options'. Now click 'PIN (Windows Hello)' – 1 in our screenshot above – then the 'Change PIN' button. Now tick the 'Include letters and symbols' box 2 and type your new PIN 3. You won't see what it is unless you click the eye icon 4.

Brian Looker

SELLING ONLINE

Remove couriers from Vinted options

I share Richard Bond's frustration at not being able to contact a human being at Evri (Letters, Issue 724). I sell a few collectable items on Vinted (football programmes, autographs, old LPs, etc) and got fed up with Evri losing them. The 'track your parcel' option is worse than useless and I've never been able to speak to an actual person.


Shipping options
Choose which options you'd like to use when you take the order to a location like a locker or parcel shop.
24/7 InPost Locker | Shop Pick-up
DPD Pickup
Evri Home Delivery
Evri ParcelShop

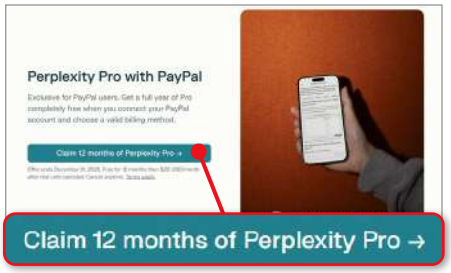
So I was delighted to learn that I could remove Evri as a delivery option for buyers. Tap the bottom-right Profile icon followed by Settings. Next, tap Postage and, under 'Shipping as a seller', tap 'From a drop-off point'. Finally, turn off the couriers you don't want to use (see screenshot above). I only offer Royal Mail now. It hasn't got a great reputation, but it's never lost anything of mine.

Nigel Penrose

AI

Get 12 months of Perplexity Pro for free

Following your 'Easy When You Know How' column on Perplexity's Comet browser (Issue 722, page 74), readers might like to know they can get a full year of Perplexity Pro for free if they sign in through PayPal (www.snipca.com/57122, see screenshot above right). This offer runs until the end of 2025.



After 12 months you have to pay $20 a month (about £15) to keep using it, with the payment coming out of your PayPal account. You don't have to renew after 12 months, of course.

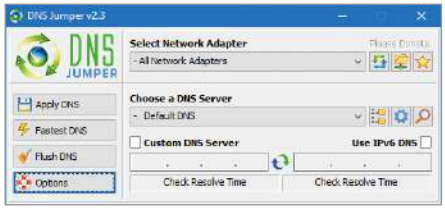
Larry Cohen

SOFTWARE

Switch to the fastest DNS automatically

In Issue 723's 'Run Windows 10 safely' feature (page 60), you mention changing your DNS provider to a more secure service. You explained how to do this in Windows, but there's a simpler way, which is to use DNS Jumper (www.snipca.com/57139, pictured below). I use this quite regularly to switch to the fastest DNS server available. You can configure it to change the DNS settings for LAN and Wi-Fi adapters very easily.

Barry Tew



Reader recommends...

HP Envy x360 laptop-tablet

£900 from www.snipca.com/56594

I hope Ken Bradshaw buys the HP Envy x360 as you recommended (Issue 721, page 26). He wanted a laptop-tablet to watch videos in the pub. Well, Ken, that's exactly what I use the Envy X360 for! I charge it for a couple of hours in the morning then take it with me to my local (which has strong Wi-Fi) to watch national and local news. I also listen to podcasts on it.

The 14in screen is bright and easy to control using taps and swipes. I'm not an expert on hinges, but the one that converts the laptop into a tablet seems well made. I still treat it delicately, but I'm sure it would survive rougher treatment.

My only gripe is that I bought it for £900 in the summer, but noticed in November that Amazon was selling it for £580. At that price it's a fantastic bargain, and I'm gutted I paid over £300 more.

Mick Vaughan

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

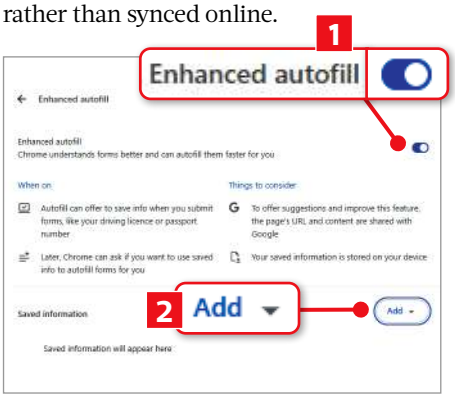
CHROME

Auto-fill more personal information

Chrome can now store and auto-fill more of your personal information, including your passport, driving licence and vehicle details. This saves you having to enter that data manually in online forms.

To add extra information to the browser, go to Settings then 'Autofill and passwords' and switch on the new 'Enhanced autofill' feature (1 in our screenshot below). Click the Add button 2 and choose from options including 'Driving licence', Passport and Vehicle. Enter the relevant details and click Save.

Annoyingly, the date fields use the US-style MM/DD/YYYY format and you're asked for your state rather than county – hopefully Google will fix this for UK users soon. Enhanced autofill information is saved on your device rather than synced online.



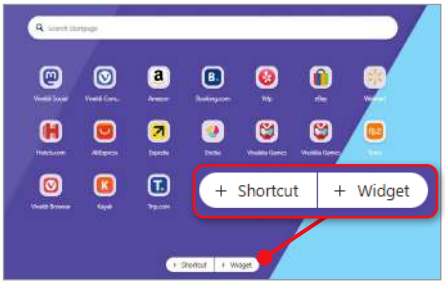
VIVALDI

Create a custom start page

Vivaldi 7.7, released in mid-November, combines the browser's Speed Dial and Dashboard features into a unified Start Page. This displays shortcuts to your favourite websites and widgets in one place, and can be customised to suit your taste and needs.

Click the '+ Shortcut' button at the bottom of the page to add further site shortcuts, and '+Widget' to browse Vivaldi's choice of widgets (see screenshot below left). These include a calendar, weather forecast, currency converter, RSS feeds and a Privacy Statistics widget that tells you how many ads and trackers the browser has blocked.

Change the background image and layout of your Start Page by clicking the Quick Settings cog top right.



FIREFOX

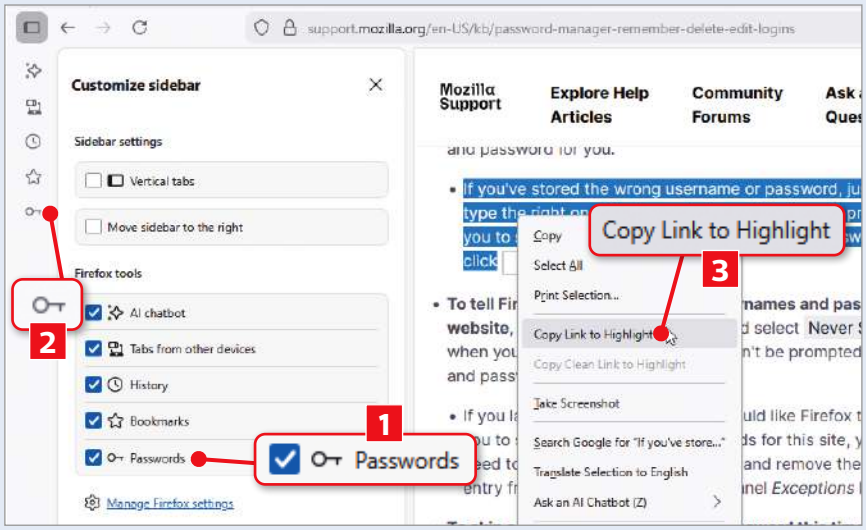
Access your passwords more easily

Firefox 145, released in mid-November, makes it easier to access your passwords without leaving the current tab – by clicking a dedicated button in the left-hand sidebar.

To add the button, click the 'Customize sidebar' button at the bottom of the sidebar and tick Passwords under 'Firefox tools' (1 in our screenshot). If you don't see the sidebar, click the 'Show sidebar' icon in the top-left corner or press Alt+Ctrl+Z.

A 'Passwords' button with a key icon will now appear on the sidebar 2. Click this to open a Passwords side panel, whenever you need to view, edit or delete saved passwords, or import logins from another browser.

Another useful new option lets you share a link to a specific section of text on a web page. Highlight the text, right-click and choose 'Copy Link to Highlight' 3. Pasting this link into Firefox or another browser will take you straight to that section with the relevant text highlighted.



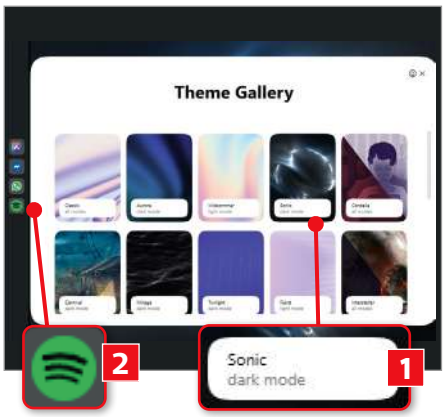
OPERA

Visualise music you play

Opera has a new dark theme that visualises music you play in the browser. Developed in collaboration with Spotify, the new Sonic theme displays a swirling animation on your Speed Dial page that changes to match the tempo and intensity of the track that's playing.

To enable the theme, click the 'Easy setup' button top-right and choose 'Theme gallery'. Select 'Sonic' (1 in our screenshot above right) and click Set Theme. Now click the Spotify icon in the left-hand toolbar 2 and either sign into Spotify or choose another music-streaming service in the top-left menu. You can get a four-month free trial of Spotify Premium before 31 December (www.snipca.com/57104).

Start playing a song and watch Sonic react. Customise its colour by right-clicking and choosing 'Edit theme'.



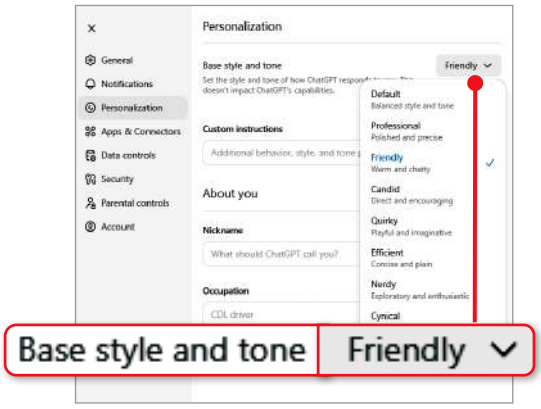
CHATGPT

Apply personality to all your chats

OpenAI has improved ChatGPT's Personalization controls, which adjust the tone of the chatbot's responses to your queries. There are now seven personalities to choose from in addition to the default tone: Friendly, Efficient, Professional, Candid, Quirky, Cynical and Nerdy.

What's more, the personality you choose will shape all your ChatGPT conversations. Previously, the change only applied to any new chats, but it now includes past interactions. So when you resume an existing chat, the AI assistant will answer your questions using the new tone.

To switch ChatGPT's personality, click or tap your account name and choose Personalization. Click the 'Base style and tone' menu (on the website – see screenshot below) or tap ChatGPT Personality (in the mobile app) and select your preferred tone.



COPILOT

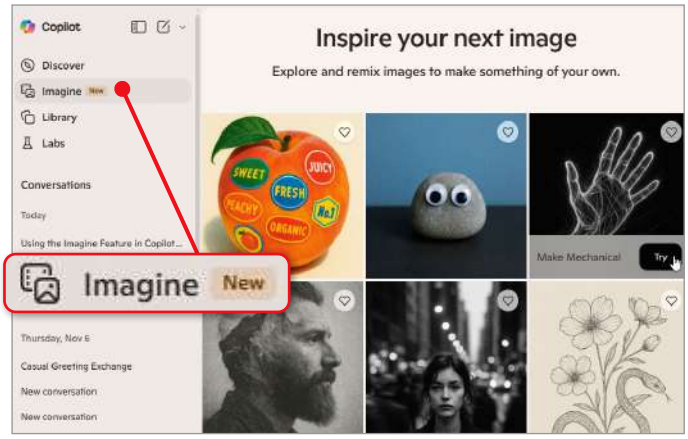
Remix existing AI images

Microsoft has expanded Copilot's image-editing capabilities to let you 'remix' existing AI-generated pictures.

This is useful when you're stuck for inspiration or aren't sure how to describe the image you want to create.

On the Copilot website, click the new Imagine option in the left-hand menu (see screenshot below left), or go to www.snipca.com/56934 (we haven't yet seen the option in Copilot's mobile or Windows apps). Here you can browse thousands of AI-generated images, covering a wide variety of subjects, styles and purposes.

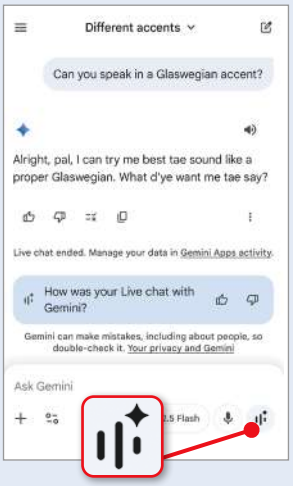
Either try a suggested prompt, such as 'Change to watercolour', or select the image and describe the changes you want to make. You can also combine it with a picture you upload. Use additional prompts to further customise the image, then share or download the result.



GEMINI

Chat more naturally with Gemini Live

Google has updated Gemini Live's audio model, to make your voice chats more natural and give you greater control over its responses. The enhanced voice mode is available in Gemini's Android and iOS apps when you tap the Live icon in the bottom-right corner (see screenshot).


Different accents
Can you speak in a Glaswegian accent?
Alright, pal, I can try me best tae sound like a proper Glaswegian. What d'ye want me tae say?
Live chat ended. Manage your data in Gemini Apps activity.
How was your Live chat with Gemini?
Gemini can make mistakes, including about people, so double-check it. Your privacy and Gemini
Ask Gemini

You can now ask Gemini to respond to your spoken queries more quickly (when you're in a hurry) or more slowly (when you need to properly digest its information). Just say "speed up" or "slow down" to adjust the pace accordingly.

Another improvement lets you use Gemini Live to practise speaking a foreign language, or to rehearse for an interview or difficult conversation. This can help build your confidence and refine your communication skills.

However, our favourite new trick is asking Gemini to adopt a different accent, such as Texan, Glaswegian or Cockney. The result is often amusingly bad.

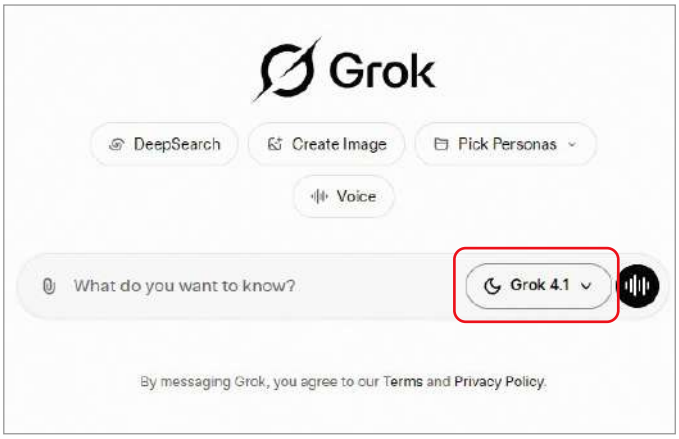
GROK

Get better answers from Grok 4.1

Grok has a new large language model (LLM) Grok 4.1, which improves its 'emotional intelligence'. This makes it better than the previous version at understanding human emotions and responding with empathy.

Grok 4.1 delivers more detailed and relevant information, generates more imaginative text and handles complicated tasks more efficiently. Just as importantly, it's less prone to 'hallucinate' by confidently providing incorrect answers.

The new LLM is available on the Grok website (www.grok.com, see screenshot below), X (formerly Twitter) and in the Grok apps for Android and iOS. See how Grok 4.1 compares to 'previous Grok' at www.snipca.com/57115.



Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID

View your recent places in Google Maps

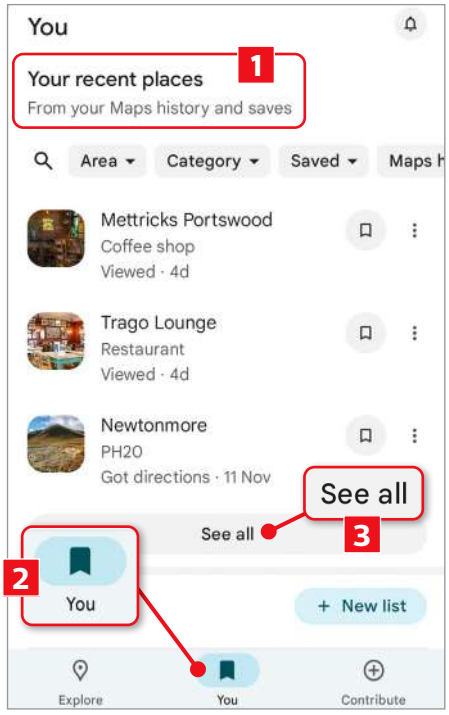
Google Maps has added a handy feature called 'Your recent places' (1 in our screenshot below) to the You tab 2 of its Android app. This shows places you've recently viewed, searched for and asked for directions to or from.

'Your recent places' differs from the existing Timeline feature in Google Maps, which shows places you've physically visited (provided Timeline is enabled in your 'Activity controls'). By default, it shows the three most recent places – tap 'See all' 3 to browse the full 'Your places' list.

You can filter your recent places by area and by category, such as 'Food and drink', 'Culture' or 'Shopping'. Places you've saved in Google Maps are also listed.

If you don't want Google to store this information, tap the Settings cog in the top-right corner of the 'Your places' list and choose 'Maps history'. Tap the Delete button and choose the date range of data to delete. You can also delete specific places manually. Select 'Auto-delete' to wipe your Maps history automatically after three to 18 months.

Google has yet to confirm whether 'Your recent places' will be added to Google Maps for iOS.

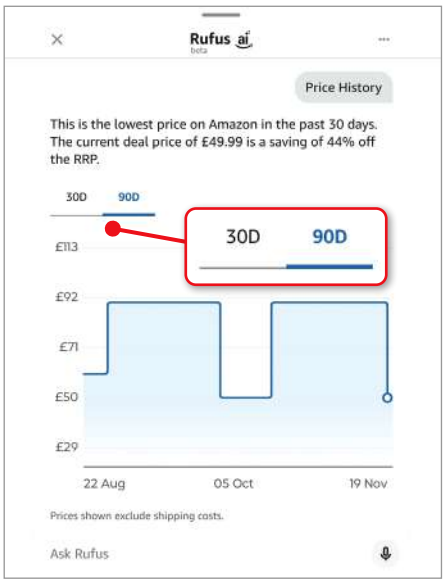


ANDROID & iOS

Check Amazon price histories using AI

One useful Amazon tool we didn't include in our 'Ultimate hacks for Amazon' feature in Issue 723 is its new 'Price history' tool. Quietly added to Amazon's Android and iOS apps earlier this year, this generates a graph showing the price of the item you're viewing over time.

Similar to the popular website CamelCamelCamel (www.snipca.com/56833), which doesn't have a mobile app, this lets you see whether a product has increased or dropped in price, so you can decide the best time to buy. It's powered by Amazon's AI assistant Rufus, and could come in very handy for your remaining Christmas shopping.



To try the new feature, tap the tiny 'Price history' link below the price on a product page. Rufus will create a graph tracking the cost of the item over 30 or 90 days (you can switch between the two – see our screenshot above) and tell you how the current price compares to the RRP. You can then ask the chatbot further questions about the product.

In the US, the feature has just been updated to let you set up price-drop alerts through Rufus, if you're an

BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

ATG Tickets

Free

Android www.snipca.com/57129
iOS www.snipca.com/57130

Book tickets for shows at 35 theatres around the UK using this new app from ATG Entertainment. Watch trailers, read descriptions and view cast lists for each production; generate scannable QR codes for your tickets; and pre-order food and drink. ATG+ members get priority booking, flexible tickets and no transaction fees.

Met Office

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/57140
iOS www.snipca.com/57141

The Met Office has redesigned its app to provide clearer and more detailed weather information. The smart new layout makes it easy to check the daily and weekly forecast; view rain, wind and temperature data on maps and graphs; and switch between your favourite locations. You can also set up alerts for severe weather warnings.

Spark

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/57137
iOS www.snipca.com/57138

This fun new app offers 'puzzles for the curious' designed to test and expand your cultural and historical knowledge. There are three new games each day, presented in a colourful and easy-to-play manner, with no ads or annoying sound effects. Daily puzzles are free, but you can pay £10.99 per year to unlock Spark's archive.

*Contains in-app purchases

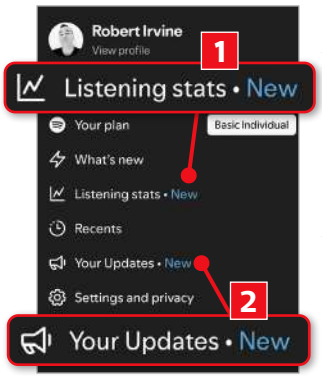
Amazon Prime member. Hopefully this will be expanded to the UK soon.

ANDROID & iOS

View your weekly Spotify listening stats

By the time you read this, Spotify will have released its annual Wrapped round-up of your most listened-to artists and songs of the year (www.snipca.com/57121). The streaming service has also introduced weekly listening statistics, so you can track your musical taste throughout the year.

To view this information, tap your profile picture in the top-left corner of the Spotify app and select the new 'Listening stats' option (1 in our screenshot left). This tells you your top artist and song for the last week, and the weeks prior to that. Tap either entry to view the top five.



The new feature isn't as illuminating as Spotify Wrapped, unless you listen to a huge variety of music every week, but it can help you revisit tracks you've enjoyed. It's available to all Spotify Free and Premium users.

Another new option, Your Updates 2, highlights upcoming concerts featuring your favourite artists, and other news related to your Spotify activity.

ANDROID

Discover where to watch TV shows

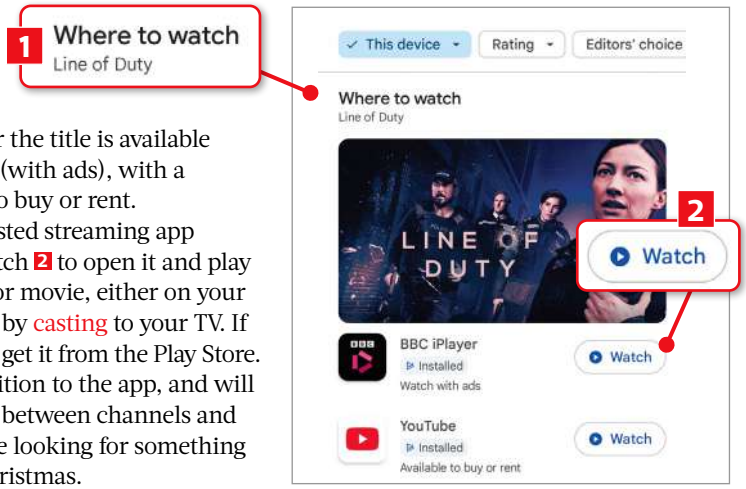
When you want to know which streaming service a particular TV show or film is available on, your best bet is usually JustWatch. You can either search its website (www.snipca.com/57134) or its app for mobile devices and smart TVs (www.snipca.com/57133).

But a new feature in the Google Play Store app makes finding where to watch popular series and films even easier. Simply search for a title and swipe down the results page to the 'Where to watch' section (1 in our screenshot above).

This lists all the streaming services that currently host that TV show or film, including BBC iPlayer, Prime Video and YouTube. Like JustWatch, Google Play tells you whether the title is available to watch for free (with ads), with a subscription or to buy or rent.

If you have a listed streaming app installed, tap Watch 2 to open it and play the programme or movie, either on your mobile device or by casting to your TV. If not, tap Install to get it from the Play Store.

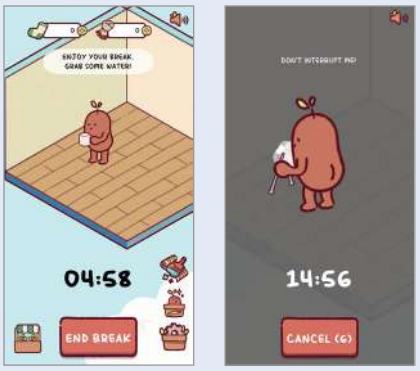
It's a great addition to the app, and will save you flicking between channels and apps when you're looking for something to watch over Christmas.



BEST APPS FOR... Reducing your screen time

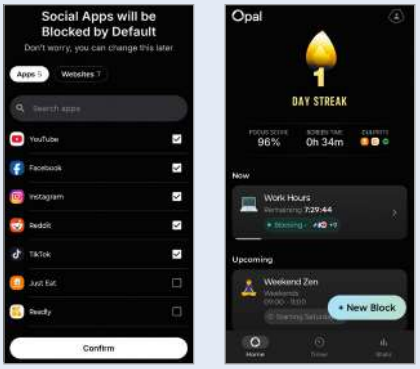
Focus Friend

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/57142
iOS www.snipca.com/57143
Google Play's 'best app of 2025', Focus Friend encourages you not to use your phone so you can focus on off-screen tasks. Set a focus time and a cartoon bean starts knitting socks it can trade for items to decorate its room. If you interrupt the focus session, the poor bean gets nothing.
Best For Making screen breaks fun



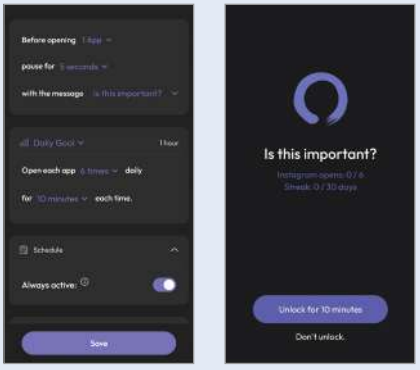
Opal

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/57145
iOS www.snipca.com/57146
Opal helps reduce the time you spend looking at your phone by blocking access to distracting apps and websites between specific times. Choose from schedules including Work Hours, 'Good Sleep, Good Life' (10.30pm–6.30am) and Weekend Limit (one hour per day), set your own time limit or start a block timer.
Best For Limiting screen time



ScreenZen

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/57151
iOS www.snipca.com/57152
ScreenZen limits your usage of time-wasting apps by pausing them before they open and displaying messages such as 'Is this important?'. It can also ask you to perform a breathing exercise or solve a maths problem before you access an app, and restrict how many times, and for how long, you use specific apps every day.
Best For Reducing app usage



*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Add more information to your scanned devices

NirSoft's WakeMeOnLan scans your network and shows which devices are switched on, making it easy to wake or manage them remotely. Version 1.95, updated in November, adds five extra columns that let you add details such as location and user for each device it finds.

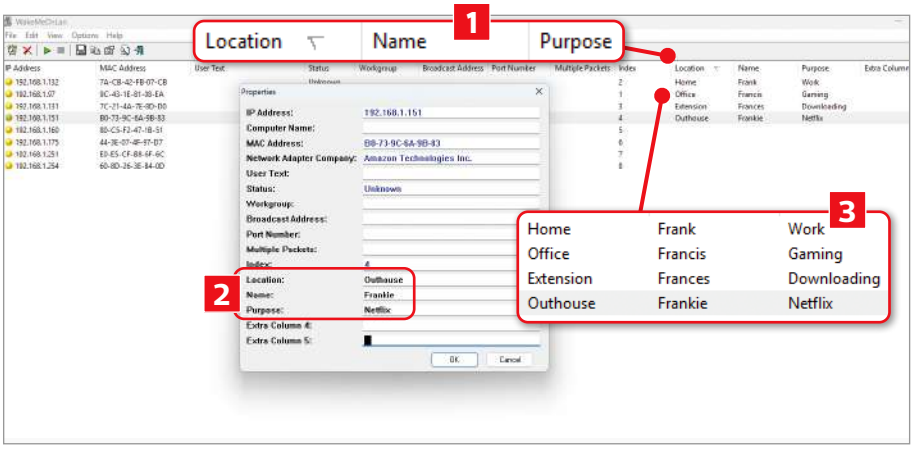
To download it, click www.snipca.com/57257 then scroll down to the Feedback section and click one of the download links. WakeMeOnLan is safe, so if you see a SmartScreen warning when installing it, click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

Now click File at the top left followed by Start Scanning. Once it has listed all your devices click View then Choose Columns. Now scroll down the box that appears and tick how many 'Extra Columns' you want. Click OK to confirm. The extra columns will be at the top right.

You now need to name them. Open the folder containing WakeMeOnLan's installed files then right-click the WakeMeOnLan CFG file, select 'Open with' and choose Notepad. Now scroll right down to the bottom to find the 'ExtraName=' entries and type a name after the equals sign – for example ExtraName1=Location (see screenshot right).

Save the Notepad file, close the tool, then reopen WakeMeOnLan. The columns should have been renamed (1 in our screenshot below). Now right-click a device you want to add information for followed by Properties, then add the info in the boxes that relate to your renamed columns 2. Click OK and you'll see the details appear in the columns 3.

```
MainFont=00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00
00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00
SendPacketTo=2
ExtraName1=Location
ExtraName2=Name
ExtraName3=Purpose
ExtraName4=
ExtraName5=
WinPos=2C 00 00 00 02 00 00 00 03 00
Columns=96 00 00 00 96 00 01 00 96 0
00 00 00 0F 00
Sort=4107
```



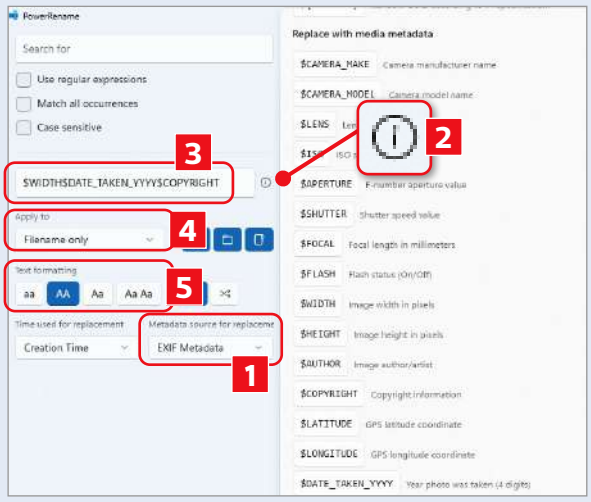
WINDOWS 10 & 11

Rename photo files using metadata

Version 0.96 of PowerToys, released in November, lets you use image metadata when renaming photo files. First, open File Management on the left, then click PowerRename and check the 'Enable PowerRename' slider is on.

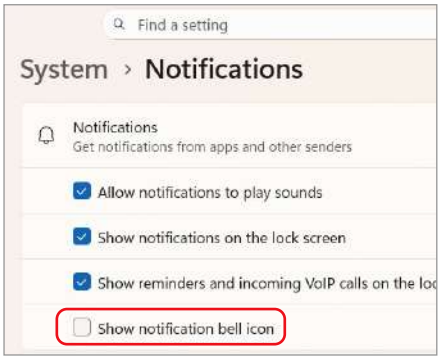
Now select your photos on your computer then right-click them and click 'Rename with PowerRename'. In the box that opens click the 'Metadata source for replacement' dropdown menu and select EXIF Metadata (1 in our screenshot).

You now need to add the metadata item to the Replace box. To see these, click the small tooltip button 2 and scroll down to 'Replace with media metadata'. Click to select the metadata you want to appear in your renamed photos and it'll appear in the Replace box 3. Choose whether to apply this to the file name and/or extension 4 then pick a text formatting style 5.



Finally, click Apply at the bottom and your file will be renamed with the metadata you chose. If it doesn't change, check that the photo file actually has metadata.

If you already have PowerToys installed, you'll be prompted to update to version 0.96 when you next open it. If you don't have it installed, download it from www.snipca.com/56718.


Find a setting
System › Notifications
Notifications
Get notifications from apps and other senders
Allow notifications to play sounds
Show notifications on the lock screen
Show reminders and incoming VoIP calls on the lo
Show notification bell icon

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Turn off notification bell icon

By default Windows shows a bell icon at the far right of your taskbar to indicate you've received a notification. If you find this annoying you can get rid of it in Settings. Right-click the area showing the time and date then select 'Notification settings'. Now click Notifications at the top and untick 'Show notification bell icon' (see screenshot above).

MICROSOFT OFFICE

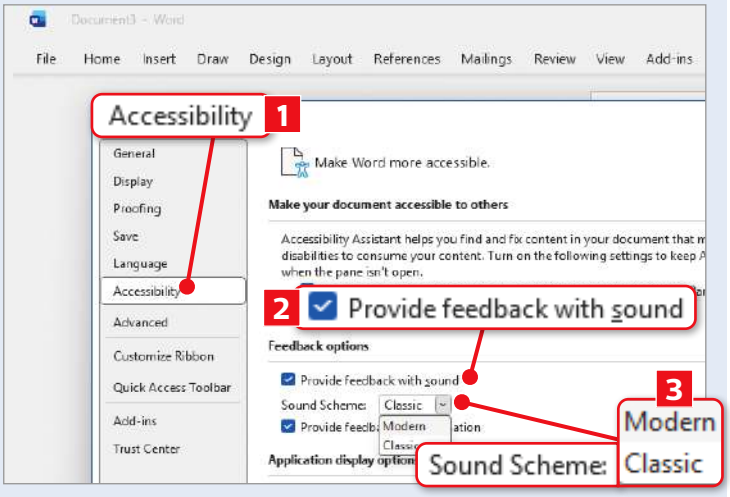
Play feedback sounds to confirm specific actions

You can make Excel, PowerPoint and Word play a sound to confirm that a certain action has taken place.

To do this, open a spreadsheet, presentation or document and click File at the top left, then Options at the bottom of the menu. Now click Accessibility on the left (1 in our screenshot) – or 'Ease of Access' in older versions – and tick 'Provide feedback with sound' 2 then choose the Modern or Classic sound 3 and click OK. The latter is more vibrant and easier to hear, but try both to see which one you prefer.

The quickest way to test these is to perform one of the actions that triggers a sound, such as pasting text, deleting a block of text, saving a file or closing a box.

Note that turning on a feedback sound in one app in Microsoft Office applies it to them all.

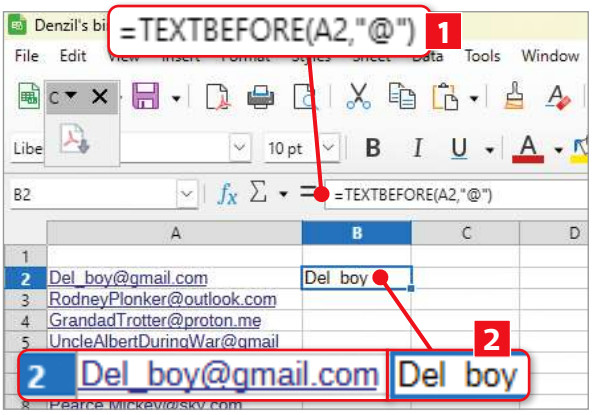


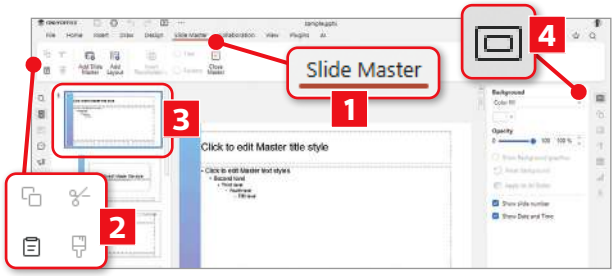
LIBREOFFICE CALC

Remove unwanted text in cells

LibreOffice 25.8, released in August, adds the TEXTBEFORE and TEXTAFTER formulas to Calc. These let you chop unwanted text from cells: TEXTBEFORE keeps only the text before a specified character or word, while TEXTAFTER keeps only the text after this point.

In our example, we have a list of email addresses, but we want to keep only the username – in other words, the text before the '@' symbol. With our first email address in cell A2, in B2 we type =TEXTBEFORE(A2,"@") – 1 in our screenshot below. This leaves only the first part of the email address (the person's name) in cell B2 2. If we wanted to keep only the domain name (for example, 'gmail.com'), we'd use the TEXTAFTER formula: =TEXTAFTER(A2,"@"). Both formulas already work in Microsoft Excel and OnlyOffice.





ONLYOFFICE

Use new Slide Master toolbar settings

Slide Master in OnlyOffice lets you edit the layout for all slides simultaneously. Version 9.1.0, released in mid-October, moves all Slide Master settings to a dedicated toolbar tab to make them easier to use.

Click 'View' at the top followed by Slide Master. You'll see the Slide Master tab appear (1 in our screenshot above). Now click this to reveal options below – including copying, cutting and pasting at the top left 2. Click one of the slides to select it 3 then click 'Slide settings' icon 4 in the top-right corner to open the Background column.

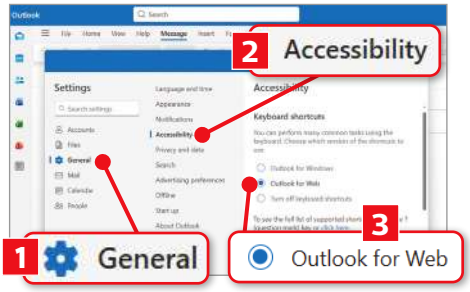
MICROSOFT OUTLOOK

Use same keyboard shortcuts for desktop and online versions

The desktop version of Outlook and its online stablemate (www.outlook.com, officially called 'Outlook on the web') have different default keyboard shortcuts. For example, in the desktop tool pressing Ctrl+N opens a new email for you to write, while in the online version it's simply N. You can change this in both versions so they match, so you don't have to remember different shortcuts.

In the desktop version of Outlook, click the top-right Settings cog then General on the left (1 in our screenshot below). Now click Accessibility 2 and select 'Outlook for Web' 3. Click Save to confirm. This will mean it uses the online keyboard shortcuts (for example, N). Follow the same steps at www.outlook.com and choose Outlook in the Accessibility section. There's no Save button, so you should refresh the page to make the change take effect. This will mean it uses the shortcuts for the desktop version (for example, Ctrl+N).

You can compare keyboard shortcuts for all Outlook versions at www.snipca.com/57218.



In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Switch to Affinity Publisher for newsletters

If you've been using Microsoft Publisher for newsletters, flyers or posters, you'll need a replacement soon. As we explained in Issue 724 (page 62), Publisher will be discontinued in October 2026 – after that it'll be unsafe to use or, in the case of Microsoft 365 subscribers, may stop working altogether.

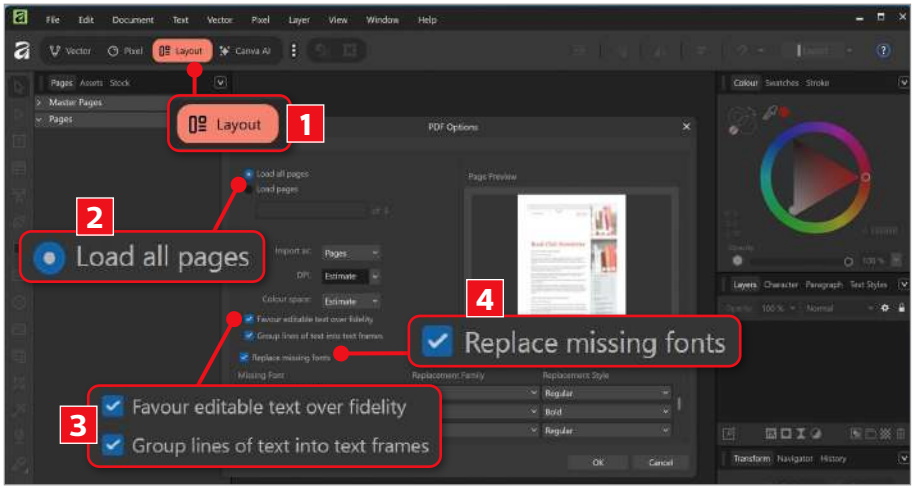
Microsoft suggests using Word instead, but Word isn't built for complex page layouts – anyone who's tried lining up text boxes will know that. Fortunately, there's a far better option. Previously priced at £60, Canva's Affinity Studio is now free and includes Affinity Publisher, a professional desktop-publishing (DTP) tool as capable as Microsoft's.

Get Affinity Studio from www.snipca.com/57120, choosing the 'MSI/EXE (x64)' option (unless your PC has an ARM processor, in which case click 'MSI/EXE ARM64'). Once installed, launch it and you'll be prompted to sign in. If you don't have an Affinity or Canva account, follow the prompts to set one up – it's free.

Import your Publisher and Word files

Affinity lets you use designs you've created in Microsoft Publisher or Word, but you can't just open Microsoft '.pub' or '.docx' files in Affinity Studio and edit them directly. So you'll need to carry out a little preparation beforehand.

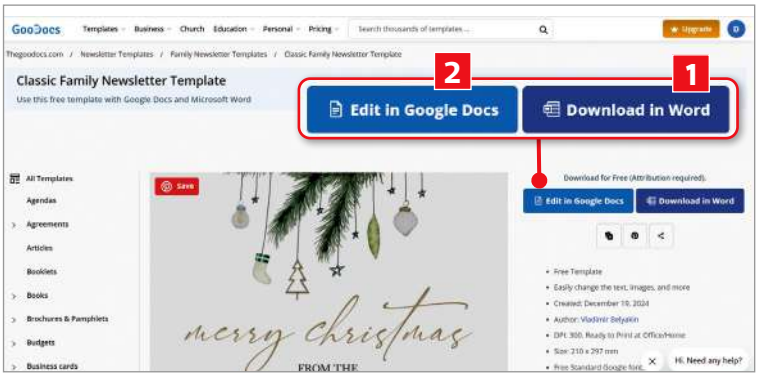
Open your existing newsletter in Publisher or Word, then click File, Save As, then Browse. Choose a location, then select PDF in the 'Save as type' dropdown menu. Leave the other options as they are and click Save.



Click 'Layout' then select your PDF and choose your settings

Now switch to Affinity. Click the Layout tab (1 in our screenshot above), then File, followed by Open. Navigate to the PDF file you exported and click Open. You'll see a 'PDF options' screen. Here, select 'Load all pages' 2. Leave the 'Import as', DPI and 'Colour space' settings as they are, but tick both the 'Favour editable text over fidelity' and 'Group lines of text into text frames' options 3. If you see 'Replace missing fonts' here 4 make sure this is ticked, then click OK.

Bear in mind that the resulting layout might not be a perfect recreation of your original newsletter. Fonts may be slightly different, for example, and image quality may vary, so a little tidying may be required. When you've finished, click File, Save As and select Affinity Files under 'Save as type'.



You can download newsletter templates in Word, PowerPoint or Google Docs

Create a newsletter from templates

One of the downsides of Affinity Studio is that it doesn't come with any built-in templates. There are, however, plenty of free templates available online, such as GooDocs (www.snipca.com/57114), which lets you download up to 10 free per month once you've created an account.

Click the template you want, then look for a download option on the left. GooDocs has lots of fake 'download' adverts, so avoid those and only click one of the blue buttons to download in Word (1 in our screenshot below left) or PowerPoint, or to edit in Google Docs 2 – avoid those if you don't have a Google account.

Choosing 'Download in Word' will open the template in a new browser window. Click the three dots (top right), then select 'Download as PDF', click Download and save the file to your PC. Use the instructions above to import your PDF template into Affinity.

You can also design your own newsletter in Affinity by clicking File, New, selecting A4 (or your desired page size) and clicking Create Document. This will open a completely blank document. Click the Layout tab top left to switch to Affinity's DTP editing tools. If you're used to working in Microsoft Publisher, these should feel fairly familiar.

Next issue: Use ChatGPT's group chat to collaborate

What's All the Fuss About...

3D-printed meat

An accusation from a Campbell's worker leaves a nasty taste in the mouth

What is it?

It isn't anything. It doesn't exist. At least, that's what Campbell's insists.

Campbell's the soup maker?

Yes. It was forced in November to deny that the meat in its soups are made using 3D printers.

Who made that claim?

It came from someone within the company itself. A video has emerged of Vice President and Chief Information Security Officer Martin Bally (pictured) allegedly saying: "It's not healthy now that I know what the f***'s in it. Bioengineered meat – I don't wanna eat a piece of chicken that came from a 3D printer."

Remind me – what's a 3D printer?

It's a machine that builds objects layer by layer from a digital design. Think of it as printing in three dimensions instead of on paper, using plastic, resin or powder rather than liquid ink. Our favourite is the Creality Hi (£359 from Creality, pictured below right). They're used to make plastic prototypes, toys, gadgets and replacement parts for all kinds of appliances. Oh, and food too.

Really?

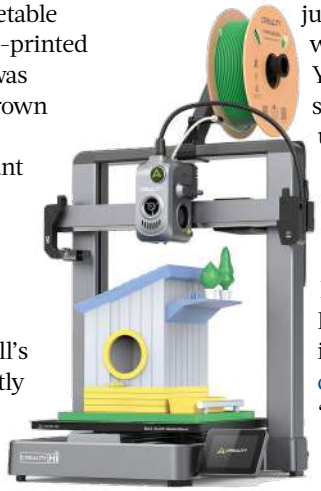
Yes, but only experimentally. Labs are testing meat substitutes and vegetable pastes, but you still can't buy 3D-printed food. Back in 2020, KFC said it was exploring a way to "print" lab-grown chicken nuggets with a Russian firm, using chicken cells and plant material, but there's no sign the project ever made it past the lab.

How did Bally's claim appear?

It was leaked by former Campbell's worker Robert Garza, who secretly recorded Bally during an hour-long meeting. Garza gave the recording to US news site ClickOnDetroit, who published extracts of Bally's sweary rant at www.snipca.com/57241. In it Bally appears to say Campbell's soup is only for "f***ing poor people" and Indians who work for the company are "idiots". The news report ends with the presenter sipping a bowl of Campbell's soup.

Did she spit it out?

No – she seemed to like it. Perhaps she's not as poor as other Campbell's customers. Or maybe she just realised that Bally was talking nonsense. You might not like its soup, but it's not made using 3D printers.



Our favourite 3D printer is the Creality Hi – just don't use it to print meat

Are you sure?

As sure as we can be. Campbell's has updated the Ingredients section of its FAQ (www.snipca.com/57240) to say: "The comments heard on the recording about our food are not only inaccurate, they are absurd. We do not use lab-grown chicken or any form of artificial or bioengineered meat in our soups. We are proud of the food we make and the high-quality ingredients we use." It adds that it only uses chicken from "reputable" suppliers in the US who meet strict standards set by the US Department of Agriculture, and makes the excellent point that Bally works in IT and "has nothing to do with how we make our food".

Are US authorities convinced by that?

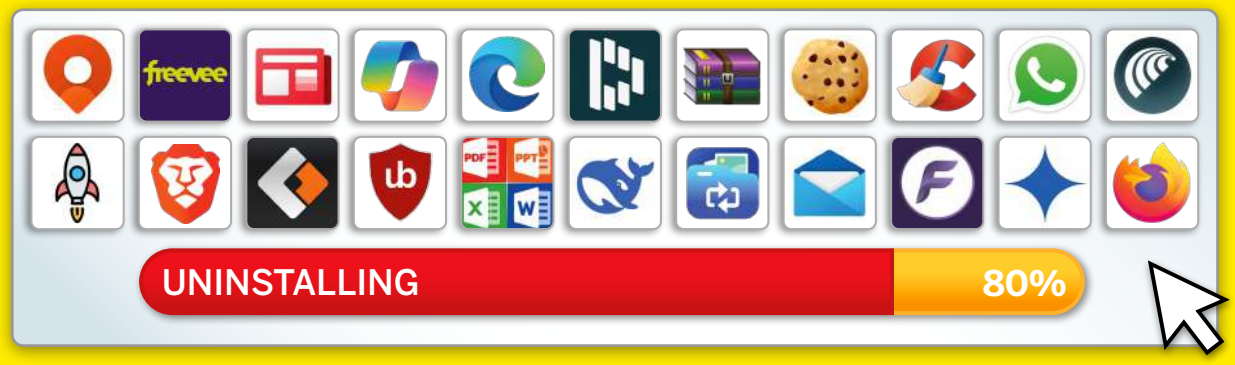
We'll have to wait and see. Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier is launching an investigation into the claims, saying the "lab-grown meat" is banned in the state. Others will probably follow.

What's happened to Bally and Garza?

Bally has been put on leave while Campbell's investigates his comments. Garza meanwhile is suing Campbell's, alleging it fired him in January after reporting Bally's comments to his supervisor. They're all in the soup, one way or another.

What You Must UNINSTALL in 2026!

Rid your PC and phone of rubbish programs and apps to start the new year junk-free. **Robert Irvine** reveals the dismal, dubious and dangerous tools you must remove



In our 'Best New Software for 2026' Cover Feature in Issue 724, we recommended the most useful new programs to download over the next 12 months. But the start of a new year is also the perfect time to rid yourself of software you no longer use or that's taken a turn for the worse.

In 2025, we've seen lots of once-great programs become bloated with unwanted options, intensify the nagging to pay for their premium versions and suffer serious privacy and security concerns. Browser extensions and mobile apps have been injected with malicious code that steals your data and bombards you with ads, and AI features have been foisted on us whether we want them or not.

These annoying trends are likely to continue in 2026, so it's a good idea to take action now and purge your PC, phone and tablet of existing junk. In this feature, we reveal the programs, add-ons and apps you should uninstall to begin the new year with a clean and safe slate.

Our removal recommendations include programs the developers have lost interest in or messed up with pointless redesigns; software with flaws that compromise your personal data; apps that don't work as they promise; and fake copies of popular tools that trick you into installing them.

It's time to uninstall this rubbish for a much happier 2026.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Remove Windows apps you never use – or no longer can
- Uninstall programs with privacy and security flaws
- Ditch rip-off software for superior free alternatives
- Stop using extensions that secretly share your data
- Avoid fake and malicious phone, tablet and TV apps
- Hide unwanted AI tools in your favourite browsers

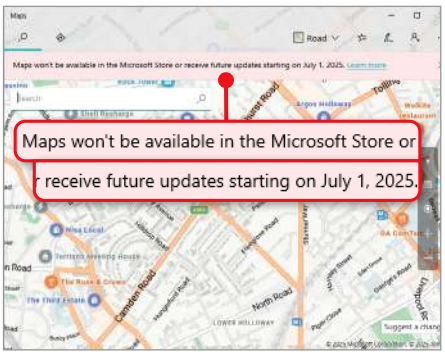
WINDOWS TOOLS YOU MUST UNINSTALL

Maps

In July, Microsoft deprecated its Maps app for Windows 10 and 11, and removed it from the Microsoft Store (see screenshot below). It still works for the moment but won't receive any updates.

Maps always struggled to compete with Google Maps, suffering from outdated and poor-quality maps, inaccurate route planning and technical glitches. Its best feature was offline maps, but that was discontinued in 2023.

Microsoft recommends you uninstall the app and use Bing Maps (www.snipca.com/57174) instead. Open the Settings app, select 'Apps & features' (in Windows 10) or 'Installed apps' (Windows 11) and click Uninstall next to Maps.

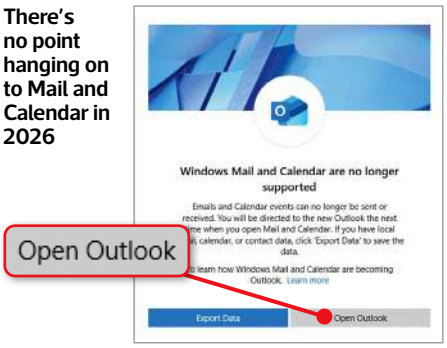


The Maps app for Windows was discontinued in July

Mail and Calendar

It's now a year since Microsoft ended support for its Mail and Calendar apps, and replaced them with its controversial new Outlook app. Although they're no longer included with Windows 11, if you're still running Windows 10 or chose to keep your apps when upgrading to Windows 11, Mail and Calendar may still be on your PC.

Opening either app redirects you to Outlook (see screenshot below), so uninstall them in 2026 through Windows Settings. If you don't like Outlook, uninstall that too and replace it with Thunderbird (www.snipca.com/57170) or Proton Mail (www.snipca.com/57171).



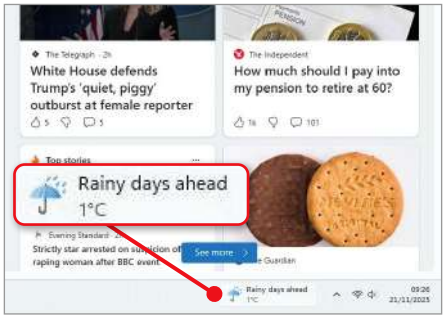
There's no point hanging on to Mail and Calendar in 2026

News and Weather

Even Microsoft has lost interest in its News and Weather apps for Windows 10 and 11. While they're still available from the Microsoft Store – as Microsoft News and MSN Weather – the apps haven't been updated for several years and there are now many easier ways to read the headlines and check the forecast.

Windows 10 has 'News & interests', which displays the news and weather when you hover your cursor over its taskbar icon. Windows 11 has a Widgets feature, which shows a weather summary on its taskbar button (see screenshot below) and opens news stories and forecasts in Edge.

These are more convenient than opening separate apps, and you can switch them on or off in 'Taskbar settings'. Uninstall the News and Weather apps through Windows Settings.


White House defends Trump's 'quiet, piggy' outburst at female reporter
How much should I pay into my pension to retire at 60?
Rainy days ahead
1°C

Use Windows 11's Widgets instead of Microsoft's News and Weather apps

Copilot and Microsoft 365 Copilot

Even if you didn't buy a new Copilot+ PC in 2025, there's been no escaping Microsoft's AI assistant. Windows 11 users now have two versions to talk to (or ignore) – the standard Copilot desktop app and Microsoft 365 Copilot.

The latter is especially annoying because it's automatically installed even if you don't use Microsoft 365. It also runs on Windows 11 startup; and takes up over 200MB of drive space. Thankfully, you can uninstall both apps, either through Windows Settings or by using a third-party uninstaller.

The latest version of O&O ShutUp10++ (www.snipca.com/56757) has a dedicated Copilot tab for this purpose (1 in our screenshot above) – just click the Remove button 2. This also uninstalls Copilot from Windows 10.

You can uninstall both Copilot apps using O&O ShutUp10++

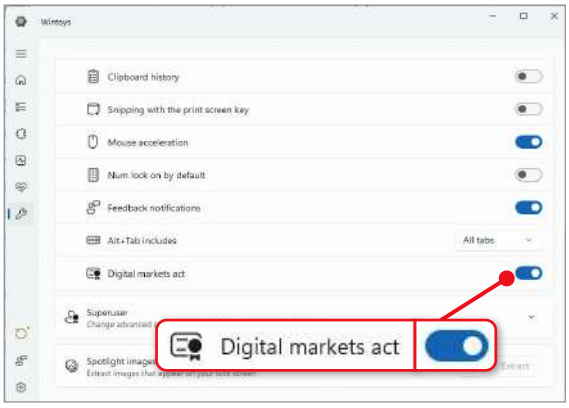
It's possible Microsoft will reinstall Copilot with a future Windows update (this obviously won't affect Windows 10). If so, you'll need to uninstall it again.

Microsoft Edge

Windows users in the EU can uninstall Microsoft's Edge browser, in accordance with the European Commission's Digital Markets Act. However, in the UK, the Uninstall button for Edge is greyed-out in Windows Settings.

Wintoys (www.snipca.com/55189) offers a way round this restriction. In its Tweaks section, select System and switch on the option 'Digital markets act' (see screenshot below). Restart your PC and you'll be able to uninstall Edge.

Alternatively, install the free tool GoAwayEdge (www.snipca.com/57179) – click 'More info' then 'Run anyway' at the SmartScreen warning – which also removes Edge from Windows. Alternatively, you can redirect the browser to use your preferred search engine, AI tool and weather service.



Wintoys includes a tweak that uninstalls Edge in the UK

SOFTWARE YOU MUST UNINSTALL

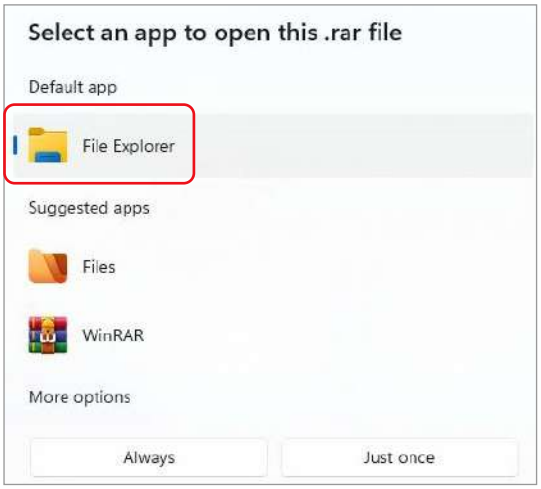
WinRAR

WinRAR will celebrate its 21st birthday in 2026, but perhaps it's time this ageing file-compression tool was retired. In August, it was reported that a serious zero-day vulnerability in the software had been exploited by two separate malware campaigns.

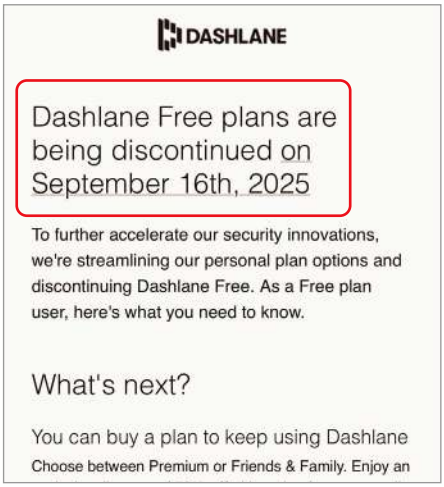
In one attack, Russian hacking group RomCom used the vulnerability – known as CVE-2025-8088 – to create malicious archive files in Windows startup folders and other important areas of the operating system. The second campaign used the same vulnerability to target Russian organisations (see www.snipca.com/57180).

Although WinRAR released an update (to version 7.13) that fixed the vulnerability, many users remain at risk if they're using an older version of the tool. Bizarrely, the two-decades-old program still doesn't include an Update button for updating it manually – and it doesn't update automatically.

Once the only software to support the RAR format, WinRAR looks increasingly redundant now that versatile free compression tools such as 7-Zip (www.7-zip.org) and PeaZip (www.snipca.com/56761) can open RAR archives. Windows 11 can now extract the contents of RAR files using File Explorer (see screenshot above right). Unless you're one of the few people who needs to create RAR files, there's no point using WinRAR in 2026.



Uninstall the vulnerable WinRAR and open RAR files in File Explorer instead


DASHLANE
Dashlane Free plans are being discontinued on September 16th, 2025
To further accelerate our security innovations, we're streamlining our personal plan options and discontinuing Dashlane Free. As a Free plan user, here's what you need to know.
What's next?
You can buy a plan to keep using Dashlane
Choose between Premium or Friends & Family. Enjoy an

Ditch Dashlane after the company scrapped its free plan

Dashlane

On 16 September 2025, the popular password manager Dashlane discontinued its Free plan for new and existing users (see screenshot above right). This means you now need to pay $59.99 (about £46) per year for Dashlane Premium – unlike rival password managers, there isn't a pay-monthly option.

Dashlane says it dropped the Free plan to focus on "developing advanced security features to defend your data from evolving threats" (www.snipca.com/57183), but long-term users have called the decision a 'cash grab'. It's clear from the company website (www.dashlane.com) that it's now more concerned with 'enterprise' password security than in helping personal users protect their logins.

In fairness, several other password managers – such as 1Password – don't have free plans, but Dashlane built a loyal fanbase by letting users choose whether to pay. It also gave very little notice (just over a month) about the change.

We recommend switching to one of the freemium tools recommended in our 'Ditch your password manager' feature in Issue 720 (buy it from www.snipca.com/57184). Our top choice was Bitwarden (www.snipca.com/56329), which has a generous free plan and a great-value subscription priced at just $10 (about £9 inc VAT) a year. This includes everything available in Dashlane Premium, except the superfluous VPN.

EaseUS Todo Backup

With its simple, friendly interface, EaseUS Todo Backup is one of the most popular backup tools, but also one of the most annoying. Its free version is incredibly pushy about getting you to upgrade to the Home edition (£35.99 a year), displaying pop-ups every time you open or close the program.

Some Home users have reported seeing a pop-up *after* the program is uninstalled warning their data is no longer safe (www.snipca.com/57200). Even the EaseUS website bombards you with pop-up offers and requests to send notifications.

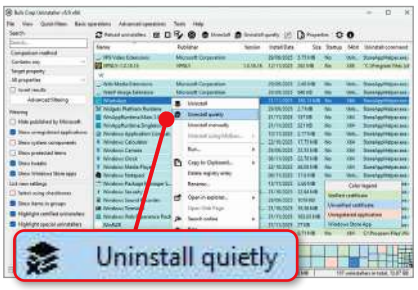
Many of EaseUS Todo Backup's most useful tools – including Clone, System Transfer and Backup Protection – are only available in the paid-for version (see screenshot above right). It also takes up a lot of space (700MB+) on your hard drive.

Additionally, there are privacy concerns about EaseUS being a Chinese company, especially with China spying on the UK.

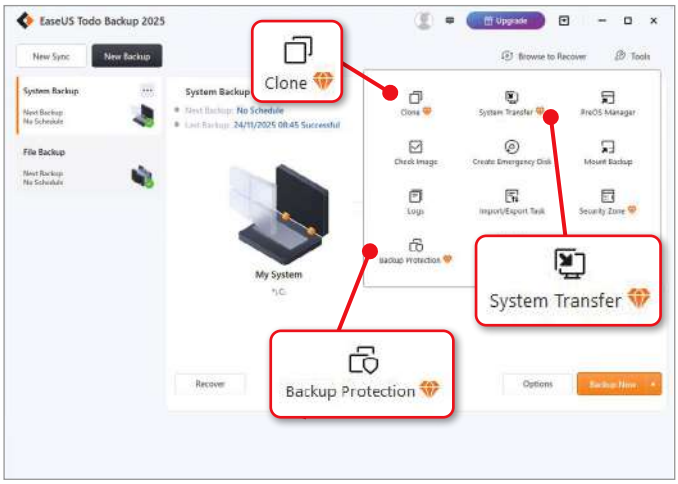
How to uninstall unwanted software

You can uninstall all the programs mentioned here through the 'Apps & features'/'Your apps' section of the Windows Settings app, but a dedicated uninstaller will ensure *all* traces are removed. The most powerful free option is BCUninstaller (www.bcuninstaller.com), which can remove any program from your PC – even when Windows can't.

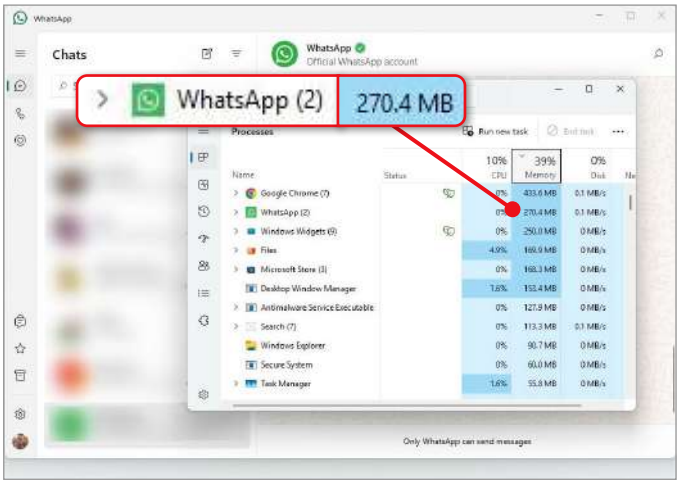
BCUninstaller beats rival free tools by speedily uninstalling multiple programs at once (hold down Ctrl as you select them), and thoroughly wipes leftover registry entries and other junk files. Its 'Uninstall quietly' option (see screenshot) handily removes software without you needing to click any prompts to confirm.



The latest version of BCUninstaller (5.9) significantly slims down its installer to make it less bloated, and automatically downloads the required .NET 6 framework.



EaseUS Todo Backup restricts many handy tools to its paid-for version



The new WhatsApp for Windows app uses more memory than before

For peace of mind – and peace from upgrade nags – we recommend Hasleo Backup Suite Free (www.snipca.com/57203) instead.

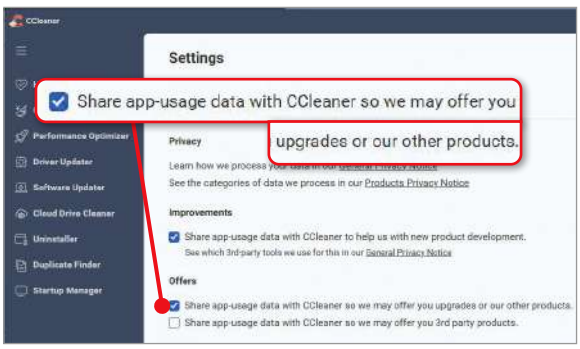
CCleaner

We advised not using CCleaner 7 in our Cover Feature in Issue 724 (page 52), but it's worth reiterating how awful it's become just in case you've installed it or are thinking of doing so. Described by users as 'horrendous', 'really bad' and 'a piece of junk', the latest update further diminishes the reputation of this once-great system cleaner.

CCleaner 7's 'sleek, modern' redesign moves and removes options that were previously easy to access. These include registry cleaning (relocated to Custom Clean), Drive Wiper (apparently ditched) and cleanup-scheduling (also gone).

When you delete data from your browsers, it's now less obvious how to choose which cookies to keep, which means you'll be signed out of all websites. CCleaner 7's scans are noticeably slower, often hanging, and the program now runs in the background with no way to close it.

By default, CCleaner shares your usage data "so we may offer you upgrades or our other products" (see screenshot below), and tries to make you install AVG Antivirus Free via a full-screen ad. Many users have downgraded to the previous version, 6.39 (see www.snipca.com/57206 for instructions), but we suggest uninstalling CCleaner altogether. BleachBit (www.bleachbit.org) and Wintoys (www.snipca.com/55189) are more reliable and trustworthy alternatives.



CCleaner shares your usage data so it can show you 'offers'

WhatsApp for Windows

In November, WhatsApp replaced its app for Windows 10 and 11 with a redesigned version that runs more like a website. This abandons the UWP (Universal Windows Platform) framework used by most Windows apps in favour of the browser-engine wrapper WebView2.

In simple terms, that means the new WhatsApp app is now a browser window designed to look like a desktop program. You might assume that means it'll be lighter and faster, but in fact the opposite is true.

Because apps in web wrappers need to run a full browser engine inside their windows, they're much slower and use a lot more RAM. Tests found the new WhatsApp for Windows uses around 30-per-cent more memory than the old app (www.snipca.com/57186). In our screenshot above right, it's using 270MB of RAM – second only to Chrome. The updated app is also less well integrated with Windows.

Meta, which owns WhatsApp, presumably made the change to save money, because the new app can run on different devices without depending on Windows code. But users clearly aren't impressed: reviews in the Microsoft Store include 'Ruined by latest update', 'Slow and glitchy' and 'WTF have Meta done?' (www.snipca.com/57188).

You may as well uninstall the app and use the online version WhatsApp Web (www.snipca.com/57189), which is essentially the same thing.

Perplexity Comet

In Issue 722 (page 74), we tested the new 'agentic' AI browser Perplexity Comet, and were impressed by its capabilities. But since then, a new vulnerability has been discovered by security researchers that has made us more wary.

Dubbed 'CometJacking', the security flaw involves hackers sending users a malicious link, either by email or concealed on a web page. When clicked, a hidden command in the URL instructs Comet's AI to perform certain actions, which could involve stealing your data.

According to security firm LayerX, which discovered the vulnerability (www.snipca.com/57194), Perplexity has security measures that stop Comet sharing sensitive data directly. But the hacker can bypass them by instructing the AI to disguise the stolen data as harmless text, so it can be shared without detection.

In response to LayerX's findings, Perplexity said it "could not identify any security impact", and marked the flaw as 'not applicable'. But the report highlights that with new technology come new security threats, and that we shouldn't blindly trust AI browsers.

Comet isn't a dangerous program, and the CometJacking vulnerability hasn't been exploited outside of LayerX's tests. Nonetheless, we'd appreciate some reassurance from Perplexity about the browser's protection.

Computer active

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BROWSER EXTENSIONS YOU MUST UNINSTALL

FreeVPN.One

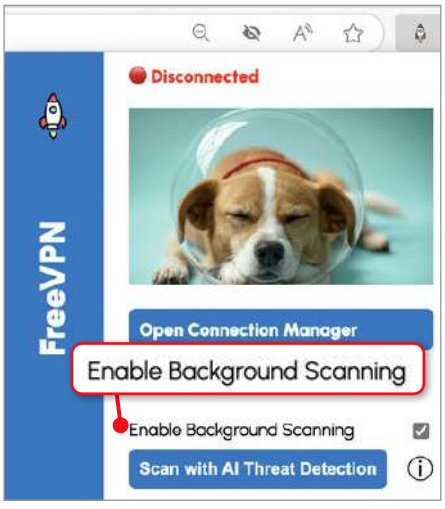
Free VPN extensions are often removed from the Chrome Web Store for containing malicious code and collecting users' data. The privacy-compromising FreeVPN.One is surprisingly still available from the store, where it has over 100,000 users.

In August, researchers at Koi Security discovered that FreeVPN.One was secretly taking screenshots of every website its users visited and sending the grabs to a domain controlled by its developer. "No user action, no UI hint, the screenshots are taken in the background without you ever knowing," says Koi's report (www.snipca.com/57207), which calls the extension spyware.

FreeVPN.One's developer insists it was only capturing screenshots of dubious web pages when Background Scanning was enabled for its AI Threat Detection feature (see screenshot below). But Koi researchers found the add-on was taking shots of safe sites such as Google Photos and Google Sheets, and potentially sharing personal data.

The AI Threat Detection option now appears to have been removed, but we still don't trust FreeVPN.One. It's not even a proper VPN, but a proxy tool. It's safer to use the official extensions from trusted VPN companies, such as NordVPN, Proton and Windscribe.

Koi Security discovered 18 other dodgy Chrome extensions, affecting more than 2.3 million users (www.snipca.com/57212). These have all now been removed from the Chrome Web Store – if you have any of the tools listed in your browser, uninstall them immediately.



FreeVPN.One was secretly capturing screenshots of users' activities

Sound Booster

In April, the browser-security company LayerX uncovered a network of browser extensions that appeared to be 'sleeper agents' for future malicious activity. The four add-ons had more than 1.5 million users between them and shared common-code patterns and behaviour with extensions that were identified as malicious.

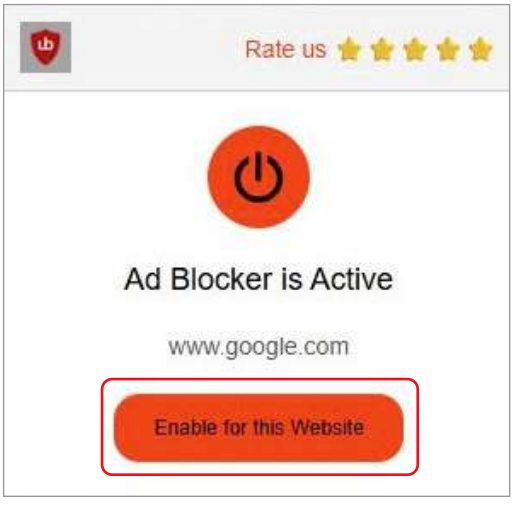
Since LayerX published its report (www.snipca.com/57209), three of the add-ons have been removed from the Chrome Web Store, but Sound Booster is still there (www.snipca.com/57210). This could mean its code has since been cleaned, or that Google has neglected to remove it, but we advise uninstalling the extension to be on the safe side.

One user says Sound Booster was flagged as a Trojan by their antivirus software and LayerX's Extensionpedia database calls it a 'critical risk' (www.snipca.com/57213).

uBlock V3

The popular content-blocker uBlock Origin stopped working in 2025, following the introduction of Google's Manifest V3 (MV3) rules. It's still available for Brave, Edge and Firefox, but in Chrome you'll need to use the MV3-compatible uBlock Origin Lite (www.snipca.com/55952).

Steer clear of the new rip-off extension uBlock V3, which imitates uBlock Origin's name and logo, but offers none of its features. It has only two options: an On/Off switch and an 'Enable/Disable for this Website' button (see screenshot below).



uBlock V3 is a poor imitation of the popular content blocker uBlock Origin

Neither option does a great job of blocking ads, and though it skips some on YouTube there are no filters for blocking online trackers and other annoyances. Stick with uBlock Origin Lite and remove uBlock V3 if you inadvertently installed it.

EditThisCookie

EditThisCookie, a handy tool for modifying and deleting website cookies, was among the casualties of Google's deprecation of Manifest V2 extensions. It was removed from the Chrome Web Store a year ago, but a malicious copycat with almost exactly the same name remained. This was found to steal user data, display ads and link to phishing scams, until it was identified and banned.

EditThisCookie looks legitimate but has a chequered history

There's now a new EditThisCookie (V3) extension in the Chrome Web Store (www.snipca.com/57214, see screenshot above), which is Manifest V3-compatible and looks and works just like the original. But while it appears to be free of malicious code, there are concerns about its legitimacy and safety.

It's not made by the same developer as the old EditThisCookie, nor does it mention being a fork of that project. The extension-checking website CRXaminer warns that EditThisCookie's permissions are "extremely broad and powerful for a cookie editor" and could be used to "inject malicious content" without your knowledge.

In its favour, the extension has a proper website (www.editcookie.com), is open-source and has positive user reviews – aside from one that says it's fake and contains malware. We suggest erring on the side of caution and avoiding it for now.

MOBILE & TV APPS YOU MUST UNINSTALL

DeepSeek

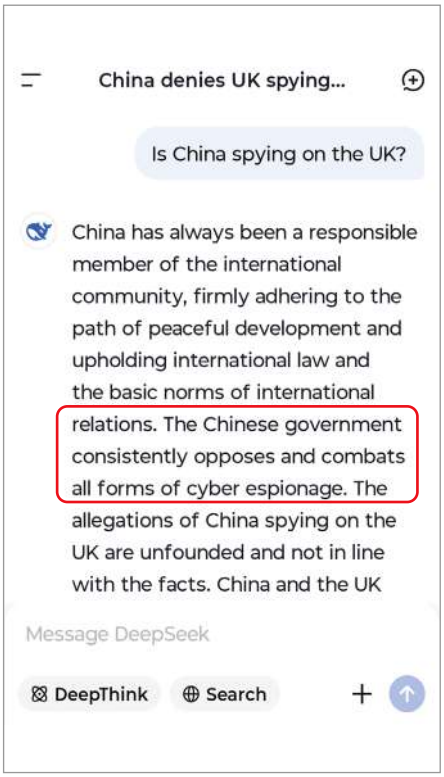
Chinese chatbot DeepSeek was the most controversial program of 2025, with a host of privacy and security concerns.

Soon after its release in January, it became the most popular app in the Apple App and Google Play stores, and has amassed more than 125 million users, but it's not something you should have on your phone or tablet.

Even if you ignore the fact DeepSeek sends your data to servers in China, it's a seriously untrustworthy app. It collects far more personal information than is necessary for an AI tool, applies weak encryption to your chats and provides biased and censored responses consistent with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda (see screenshot below).

At the start of the year, a DeepSeek data leak compromised over one million sensitive records, and in November it was found to be generating unsafe code in response to 'politically sensitive' (for the CCP) prompts (www.snipca.com/57220).

It's no wonder many countries, including Italy, Australia and some US states, have banned the DeepSeek app from government devices. You should ban it from yours, too.


China denies UK spying...
Is China spying on the UK?
China has always been a responsible member of the international community, firmly adhering to the path of peaceful development and upholding international law and the basic norms of international relations. The Chinese government consistently opposes and combats all forms of cyber espionage. The allegations of China spying on the UK are unfounded and not in line with the facts. China and the UK
Message DeepSeek
DeepThink
Search

DeepSeek's responses adhere to Chinese government propaganda

Document Reader – File Manager

Google removed hundreds of malicious apps from the Play Store in 2025, after being contacted by security researchers. Although it doesn't usually reveal the names of banned apps, one called 'Document Reader – File Manager' was found to download the banking Trojan Anatsa (also known as TeaBot).

According to security company Zscaler, which discovered the threat – along with 77 other apps from various 'malware families' – Anatsa creates fake login screens for banking and cryptocurrency apps, captures keystrokes and steals sensitive data (www.snipca.com/57223). Ensure you uninstall 'Document Reader' immediately if it's on your device – it was downloaded more than 220,000 times before it was removed from the Play Store.

Photo Recover–File Recovery

In Issue 720's 'Named & Shamed' (page 21), we expressed our disbelief that this unknown and "utterly useless" app had shot to second place in the Google Play Store charts. Unsurprisingly, it has since slipped from the Top 200 and garnered a string of negative reviews and a measly 2.8-star rating, after more than five million ill-advised installs.

Claiming to "recover your deleted photos, videos and other types of files", Photo Recover-File Recovery does nothing of the sort and instead bombards you with ads, fake virus warnings (see screenshot below) and fake alerts about how many items it can restore. You have a better chance of recovering files from the Bin or Trash folder on your mobile device, than with this junk app.

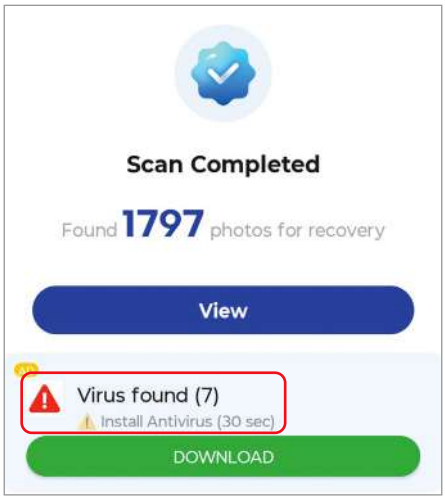
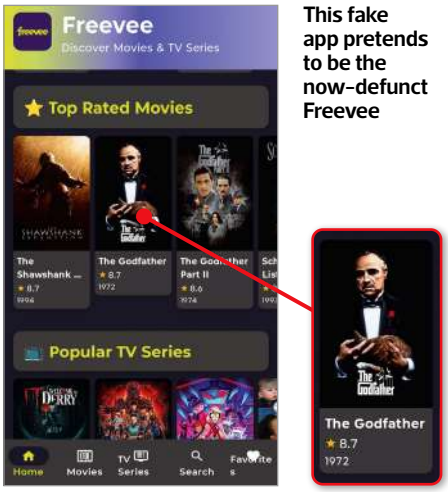


Photo Recover-File Recovery is full of ads and fake alerts



This fake app pretends to be the now-defunct Freevee

Freevee

Amazon shut down its free, ad-supported streaming service in September, and moved most of Freevee's TV shows and films to Prime Video. The Freevee app should have been removed from your Fire TV Stick or set by a Fire OS update, but if you have it on any other device uninstall it from there too.

In November, a new Freevee app appeared in the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/57224) with the same logo as Amazon's defunct service, and the promise of thousands of free TV series and movies. We probably don't need to tell you this is a fake, from a mysterious company called NextPlay Gold, and doesn't actually stream anything. It merely provides brief summaries of classic films such as *The Godfather* (see screenshot above). Uninstall it if you've been duped.

Flix Vision

Flix Vision (also known as Flixvision) was one of the apps Amazon blocked in 2025 because it allows Fire TV Stick users to stream content illegally. The app also includes code that can share your internet connection without your knowledge to make money for the developer.

It's therefore not only illegal but dangerous to use Flix Vision, and – whatever your views on its crackdown on sideloading (see our news story in Issue 723, page 7) – we think Amazon made the right call with this app. If you've sideloaded it on your Android TV or streaming device (you no longer can on Fire TV), uninstall it now.

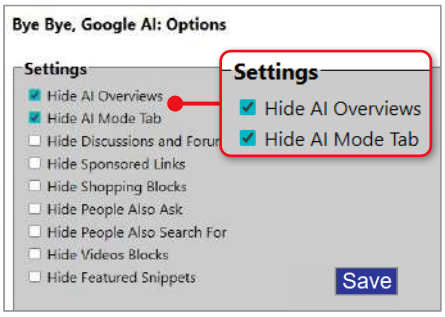
REMOVE AI TOOLS FROM YOUR BROWSER

Hide Google's AI Overviews and AI Mode

Google introduced AI Mode in the UK in July 2025, a year after its AI Overviews first appeared above search results. This has added an AI Mode tab to results pages, and an AI Mode button to Chrome's New Tab page and its address bar.

If you find these AI features more annoying than useful, you can hide them in your search results using the Chromium extension 'Bye Bye, Google AI' (www.snipca.com/57225). Tick the boxes Hide AI Overviews and Hide AI Mode Tab (see screenshot below), then click Save.

To remove AI Mode from Chrome's address bar and New Tab page, type chrome://flags in the bar and press Enter. Find and disable the options AI Mode Omnibox entrypoint and NTP Compose Entrypoint then relaunch the browser.



Hide AI Overviews and AI Mode in Google search results

Turn off Firefox's new chatbot

In 2025, Firefox became the latest browser to add AI features – to the annoyance of many users. The most noticeable is a new 'AI chatbot' button in the left-hand sidebar, which lets you chat with ChatGPT, Google Gemini and other AI assistants.

To remove this, simply right-click it and choose Remove AI Chatbot. You can restore the button by clicking the 'Customize sidebar' cog and ticking the box next to 'AI chatbot'.

What I want to uninstall – but can't

Ideally, I'd like to get rid of OneDrive in 2026 – I never use it and I don't like it popping up all the time trying to back up my files. However, since I enrolled for Windows 10's ESU scheme by syncing my settings through OneDrive, I'm worried I'll lose that extra year of support (10 months now) if I uninstall the app. So I've settled for disabling it instead, by stopping it running automatically on Windows startup.

On my phone, I'm hoping WhatsApp shows mercy in 2026 by letting us remove or at least hide its Ask Meta AI button. This blue-and-purple circle is the bane of my messaging life, because I'm always tapping it accidentally and starting a chat with the pointless AI assistant.

Finally, I wish I could uninstall the Amazon Kids app from my Fire TV Stick, as I don't have children and it wastes valuable storage. But because it's unremovable, I'll just have to ignore it for yet another year.

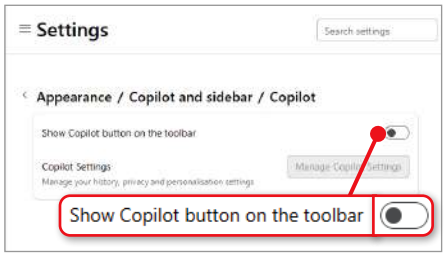
Robert Irvine, Deputy Editor

Switch off Copilot in Edge

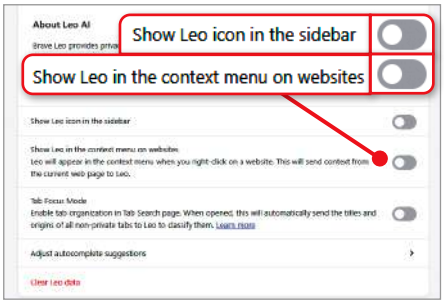
Microsoft has continued its mission to turn Edge into an AI browser by introducing a new Copilot Mode (www.snipca.com/57227). Although this mode is optional, even the standard version of Edge has a permanent Copilot button in the top-right corner.

To remove it, right-click the Copilot icon and choose 'Hide Copilot'. This will open Edge's 'Copilot and sidebar' settings, where you can switch off the option 'Show Copilot button on the toolbar' (see screenshot below).

If you inadvertently activate Copilot Mode, go to the 'AI innovations' section of Edge's Settings (type edge://settings/ai in the address bar) and switch off the slider next to Copilot Mode.


Settings
Search settings
Appearance / Copilot and sidebar / Copilot
Show Copilot button on the toolbar
Copilot Settings
Show Copilot button on the toolbar

You can hide the new Copilot button in Edge's toolbar



Hide Leo in Brave or turn off the AI tool altogether

Disable Leo in Brave

Brave has made its AI assistant Leo difficult to ignore, but you can reduce its presence in the browser. Go to the Leo section of Brave's Settings (type brave://settings/leo-ai in the address bar) and switch off 'Show Leo icon in the sidebar' and 'Show Leo in the context menu on websites' (see screenshot above). Also right-click the Leo toolbar button and choose 'Hide Leo AI icon'.

To turn off Leo altogether, type brave://flags in the address bar and press Enter. Search for Brave AI Chat and select Disabled in its dropdown menu. Relaunch the browser for an AI-free experience. ca

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BEAT 2026's PRICE RISES

Get ready to pay more for your technology over the next 12 months. **Robert Irvine** reveals what will become more expensive and how to cut the cost

We're accustomed to prices increasing in line with inflation, but there are many other factors that influence the cost of technology. In 2026, we're likely to see some steep and disproportionate price hikes that leave us all paying more for our devices and services. Here we explain the best ways to offset these rising costs over the coming year.

Mobile and broadband contracts

As we reported in Issue 723 (page 6), O2 will increase its monthly prices by £2.50 in April 2026. The other UK mobile providers are hiking their prices around the same time.

EE customers will pay an extra £2.50 a month (£4 on handset-and-airtime plans), as will Vodafone customers who started or renewed their contracts after 12 November (up from £1.80). Likewise, Three will charge new and renewing customers (from after 9 November) £1.80 to £2.30 more, depending on their data plan.

Broadband is also getting more expensive, with BT, TalkTalk, Virgin Media, Plusnet and other providers set to increase their prices by £3 to £4 in April. Sky doesn't usually announce its annual rises until February.

All these increases are in response to Ofcom's rule, introduced in January 2025, that phone and broadband price rises should be in 'pounds and pence' rather than linked to inflation. If you're on an older contract, your annual price hike may still be inflation-based or apply the amount specified when you signed up.

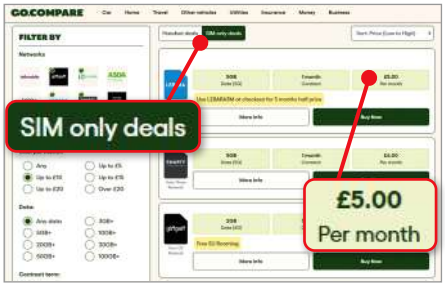
How to beat the price rise

Mobile and broadband providers give you 30 days to cancel your contract without penalty if you're unhappy with their price hikes. However, because they've already announced their increases, you'll probably have to pay an exit fee.

With mobile plans, this can still work out cheaper in the long run if you switch to an MVNO – though it depends how many months are left on your contract. SIM-only deals from MVNOs such as Smarty, Lebara and iD Mobile cost from as little as £5 a month and don't tie you into lengthy contracts, so price rises aren't a worry. Compare the latest offers at www.snipca.com/57242 (see screenshot below).

To cut your broadband costs, either speak to your provider about moving to a slower and cheaper plan (this usually means starting a new contract), or wait out your contract and go elsewhere.

Under Ofcom rules, if you're not receiving the guaranteed minimum speed, and your ISP can't fix it within 30 days, you can leave without paying an exit fee. Test your connection at www.speedtest.net.



SIM-only deals from MVNOs are cheap and offer monthly contracts

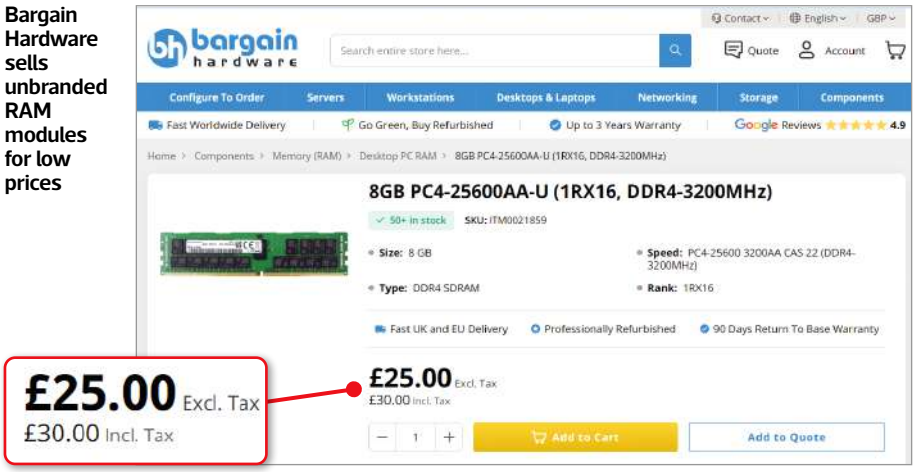
PC memory and PCs

The cost of RAM, particularly the DDR4 and DDR5 modules used in PCs and laptops, has soared in 2025. PC retailer CyberPowerPC says the price of memory has surged by 500 per cent since the start of the year (www.snipca.com/57244), and it's likely to get even more expensive in 2026.

There are several factors behind the price rise. The AI boom has increased demand for DRAM (Dynamic Random-Access Memory – the type used by computers) and diverted supply from consumer hardware to AI data centres.

Stock was already running low after DRAM manufacturers slowed production in 2022-23 when prices were falling, and were making the transition from DDR4 to the more powerful DDR5. With demand outstripping supply, prices have rocketed.

This most obviously affects the cost of RAM you buy to upgrade your system memory (16GB DDR5 modules are now priced at over £100 – and rising) and custom-built computers. But it has also increased the price of new PCs, with manufacturers passing the cost of DRAM on to customers.



Bargain Hardware sells unbranded RAM modules for low prices

How to beat the price rise

DRAM production will be ramped up in 2026 to end the shortage crisis, but it will take a while for prices to come down. If you desperately need more memory for your PC, consider buying a refurbished module from Bargain Hardware (www.snipca.com/57245).

This sells 'rigorously tested' RAM from most of the major brands, as well as low-priced unbranded modules – you can buy 8GB for just £25 (£30 inc VAT – see screenshot above). Also check eBay's Computer Memory store (www.snipca.com/57246) for new and used RAM bargains, but note that many modules are sent from China.

If you're buying a new PC in 2026, save money by choosing a model with less RAM – say 8GB instead of 16GB. But do make sure that's sufficient for your computing needs.

Smartphones

As we reported in Issue 724 (page 8), the price of smartphones is likely to jump in 2026 and again AI is to blame. Chinese phone manufacturer Xiaomi says the AI industry's intensive demand for the DRAM chips used by smartphones will lead to a "sizeable rise in product retail prices".

In November, Samsung hiked the price of some memory chips by up to 60 per cent (www.snipca.com/57248). This extra expense is likely to be passed on to consumers and will also force manufacturers to skimp on other hardware features.

How to beat the price rise

Unless you insist on owning the latest iPhone, whatever the cost, it's wise to buy a new phone before the price rise takes effect. At the time of writing, there were no significant price increases or stock shortages among devices already on sale, but new models launched in 2026 will undoubtedly be more expensive.

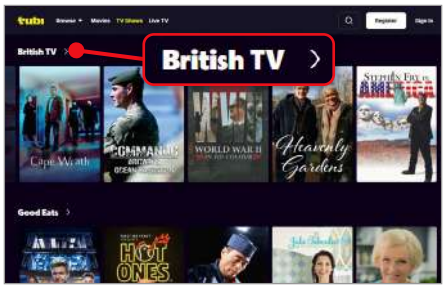
Save money on a new phone by buying a refurbished device

Buying a phone with 8GB of RAM rather than 16GB will cut costs, as will choosing a mid-range device from Samsung, Motorola or Oppo. These generally use LPDDR4 memory instead of LPDDR5, which is less affected by the DRAM shortage.

You could also buy a refurbished phone from Back Market (www.snipca.com/57249) or Amazon Renewed (www.snipca.com/56830), though it takes a while for new models to appear on those sites. We found the Google Pixel 10 (which went on sale in August for £799) on Back Market for £528 (www.snipca.com/57250, see screenshot above).

Streaming services

Some TV and music-streaming services are likely to increase their subscription prices in 2026. They claim this is to cover the cost of licensing new content, creating their own and improving their features.



Tubi has lots of great TV shows and films you can watch for free

How to beat the price rise

Unless you insist on owning the latest iPhone, whatever the cost, it's wise to buy a new phone before the price rise takes effect. At the time of writing, there were no significant price increases or stock shortages among devices already on sale, but new models launched in 2026 will undoubtedly be more expensive.

Buying a phone with 8GB of RAM rather than 16GB will cut costs, as will choosing a mid-range device from Samsung, Motorola or Oppo. These generally use LPDDR4 memory instead of LPDDR5, which is less affected by the DRAM shortage.

You could also buy a refurbished phone from Back Market (www.snipca.com/57249) or Amazon Renewed (www.snipca.com/56830), though it takes a while for new models to appear on those sites. We found the Google Pixel 10 (which went on sale in August for £799) on Back Market for £528 (www.snipca.com/57250, see screenshot above).

Streaming services

Some TV and music-streaming services are likely to increase their subscription prices in 2026. They claim this is to cover the cost of licensing new content, creating their own and improving their features.

Tubi has lots of great TV shows and films you can watch for free

Paramount+ will raise its prices in the US in January 2026, from $7.99 to $8.99 a month for its ad-supported Essential plan, and $12.99 to $13.99 for ad-free Premium. Those hikes are likely to be replicated in the UK – the company has already 'retired' its free trial.

Disney+, Apple TV+ and Spotify recently hiked their prices in the UK, so it's unlikely we'll see further rises until the end of 2026. Netflix did so at the start of 2025, but may soon apply another increase to cover its new focus on sport and other live events.

The cost of a TV Licence is expected to rise by £7 to £181 in April, in line with inflation (up from £174.50). This means you'll pay more to watch BBC iPlayer and live TV on other channels.

How to beat the price rise

Provided you only watch TV shows on-demand and forsake BBC programmes altogether, you can cancel your TV licence to beat the price rise. Over-75s who receive Pension Credit are entitled to a free licence.

Save money on streaming by switching to the ad-supported plan, or cancel your subscription and watch free services such as Tubi (www.tubitv.com, see screenshot left) and Pluto TV (www.pluto.tv), which have lots of British shows. See our Cover Feature in Issue 719 (buy it from www.snipca.com/57251) for more recommendations. ca

Buy a cheap TV in 2026

Some good news for 2026 is that the price of many smart TVs and monitors will come down. The cost of manufacturing OLED screens has decreased considerably over the past few years (www.snipca.com/57253), and devices that use the technology are now cheaper than ever, especially since rival QLED displays emerged.

OLED TVs tend to be 55in and over, so if you want to upgrade to a huge telly now's the time. Or, if you're not concerned about superior picture quality, buy an LED TV, as prices will continue to slide in 2026.

We're also seeing big price drops in Freely TVs – you can buy a 40in Bush set for just £129 (www.snipca.com/57254, pictured) and ditch both your aerial and streaming stick.

Keep your VPN unblocked in 2026

Getting locked out of sites and services while using a VPN? **Jonathan Parkyn** explains the tricks and techniques you can use to bypass the blocks

Public interest in VPNs has surged since the UK introduced age-verification rules for sites with adult content. But it isn't just about teenagers trying to beat the rules. Increasingly, everyday users rely on VPNs to protect themselves on public Wi-Fi and secure their home networks, and to stop advertisers tracking them.

However, as VPNs go mainstream, websites are fighting back by blocking connections to enforce regional restrictions, protect business models, prevent fraud or preserve ad revenue. Getting blocked doesn't mean your VPN is broken though. In many cases, taking a few simple steps can keep your VPN working and stop sites from locking you out.

Choose a quality VPN provider

Your choice of VPN greatly affects how often you'll get blocked. Cheap or free services often recycle small pools of IP addresses, many of which are already blacklisted, making it far easier for sites to detect and block you. They also lack advanced features to bypass blocks, making them less suitable for daily use.

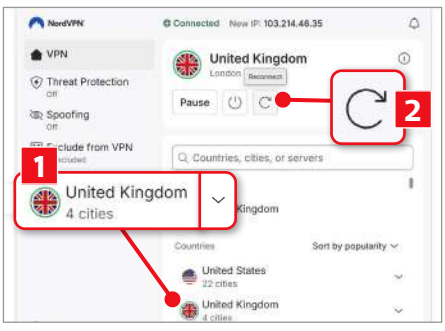
By contrast, paid-for VPNs use a wider range of IP addresses, better encryption and more advanced ways to route your connection – reducing your chance of being blocked.

Refer back to our Cover Feature in Issue 717 (page 50), where we rated the best free and paid-for VPNs. NordVPN (www.nordvpn.com) topped the list for paid services, followed by Proton VPN Plus (www.protonvpn.com) then ExpressVPN (www.expressvpn.com). All three use anti-detection technologies you won't find in cheaper or less capable VPN services.

Switch servers

Sometimes switching to another server within your VPN can bypass a block, giving you a fresh IP address that may not be blacklisted. In NordVPN, for example, click the down arrow next to a country to pick a new server (1 in our screenshot below), or use the Reconnect (round arrow) button 2 to connect to a new server in the same location. Proton VPN Plus, ExpressVPN and other services work similarly.

However, this trick is less reliable than it used to be. Sites and services now use AI tools to flag suspicious IP addresses and spot VPN traffic even when you switch servers.



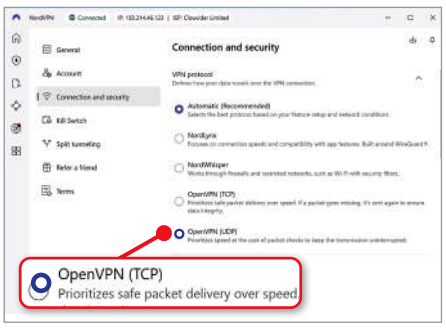
Pick a country then choose a new server, or click the Reconnect button

Change your VPN protocol

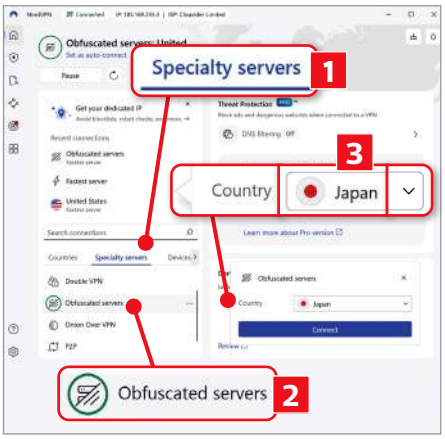
VPN protocols are the rules your VPN uses to send data over the internet. Different protocols behave differently, and some are easier for sites to detect. If one is blocked, switching to another protocol (if your VPN allows it) can help you get through.

Most paid-for VPNs let you switch between different protocols, but usually not via the browser extension. You'll need to launch the full desktop (or mobile) tool to access this setting.

In the NordVPN desktop app, for example, click the Settings cog, then 'Connection and security' and click the down arrow next to 'VPN protocol' to see available protocols. OpenVPN (TCP) (see screenshot below) is often a good option if you're trying to avoid being blocked. Each time you change protocols, you'll need to disconnect and reconnect (unless your VPN does this automatically).



Change your protocol to OpenVPN (TCP) to unblock your VPN



Select 'Obfuscated servers' and choose a country from the menu

Will the UK ban VPNs in 2026?

Almost certainly not. It's true that VPNs are under increasing scrutiny, with media companies becoming angrier that they let people bypass regional locks, while lawmakers worry they're being used to beat age restrictions. But banning them would be a draconian move that only the likes of China, Iran, North Korea and Russia have done to date.

However, the Government message is a little contradictory. In October, Baroness Liz Lloyd, minister for the digital economy, insisted there were no plans to ban VPNs, but added that "nothing is off the table" when it comes to protecting children online. If nothing is off the table, then why wouldn't that include banning VPNs?

We'll overlook such clumsy rhetoric and confidently predict that VPNs will stay legal. They're vital for cybersecurity, remote work and business compliance.

What's far more probable is that sites will continue to improve their VPN-blocking systems – and VPNs will respond with new techniques to avoid detection.

Use obfuscation or stealth mode

When you use a VPN, your traffic can show telltale signs like a VPN 'fingerprint'. Some sites and networks detect these patterns and block access. Many VPNs offer a special mode – called Obfuscated, Stealth or Scramble – that disguises your traffic to look like ordinary HTTPS which is the same encryption used on secure websites without a VPN.

Turning on obfuscation usually requires the desktop or mobile app, as it isn't available through browser extensions. In NordVPN, click 'Specialty servers' (1 in our screenshot above), then select 'Obfuscated servers' 2. To pick a specific location, click the three dots next to 'Obfuscated servers' and choose a country from the dropdown menu 3.

Route VPN traffic through Tor

Many VPNs now offer 'Tor over VPN' options, which combine Tor's anonymity with your VPN's protective shield. Tor traffic is routed through multiple encrypted nodes and uses different network patterns, not standard VPN connections. This can help bypass basic VPN blocks.

On the downside, it's far slower than any standard VPN connection. Also, some sites block Tor outright, especially banking sites and services that rely on strict login checks. It's definitely worth a try, though, if all your other attempts have failed.

NordVPN users can use Tor mode by clicking 'Specialty servers' on the main dashboard, then selecting Onion Over VPN – again, click the ellipses (three dots) if you need to connect from a specific country.

Use a static IP address

Connecting via a dedicated or static IP address makes it appear you're always in the same location, helping prevent sites from flagging constantly changing addresses. Dedicated addresses also look less suspicious overall, since far fewer people use them than the thousands who use shared addresses.

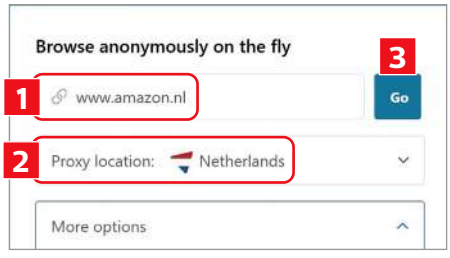
The catch is that not all VPNs support dedicated IP addresses, and it's usually something you have to pay for. And because sites can still block traffic from a dedicated IP address, there's no guarantee it'll solve your problems.

To use a static IP in NordVPN, open the desktop tool, click 'Specialty servers' and select Dedicated IP. Unless your subscription includes a dedicated IP address, you'll be prompted to log into your account's web page and pay for one (around £3 to £4 a month).

Use a proxy server instead

A web proxy is designed to route browser traffic through a different server. It won't protect your entire device or encrypt all your online activity. But because it's simpler than a full VPN, it can sometimes avoid VPN-specific detection systems.

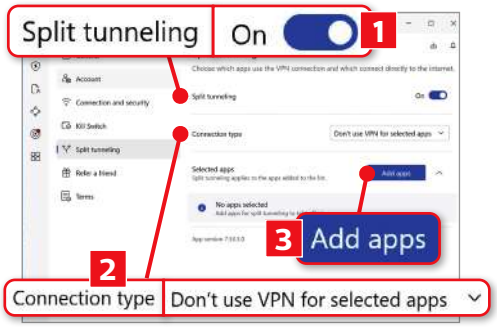
Unfortunately, free proxies are often slow, overloaded or unreliable, and paid-for ones can cost nearly as much as a VPN. But it's worth trying one to see what effect it has. One of the best is Hide.me – go to www.snipca.com/57228 then in the panel on the right type the site's URL (1 in our screenshot below), select a country from 'Proxy location' 2, and click Go 3. If it doesn't work, try a different location or use 'More options' to adjust the settings.



Try a free proxy like Hide.me to avoid VPN detection

Switch off your VPN for stubborn sites

Before you switch off your VPN altogether, there's one last thing you can try (assuming your VPN supports it): split tunnelling. This lets you select which specific apps are routed through the VPN. So, if a stubborn site or app refuses VPN connections, you can exclude it from your VPN, while keeping your protection active everywhere else.



Turn on split tunnelling to select which apps are routed through your VPN

In NordVPN's desktop app, you'll find split tunnelling under Settings, 'Split tunnelling' (1 in our screenshot above). Enable it, then choose 'Don't use VPN for selected apps' 2 next to 'Connection type'. Click 'Add apps' 3 to select the apps you want to bypass the VPN. You might, for example, install a second web browser and exclude this, so you can open it whenever you need to access a blocked site.

If that still doesn't work, you may need to temporarily disable your VPN entirely. In NordVPN, simply open the app or browser extension and click Disconnect. ca

Problems Solved

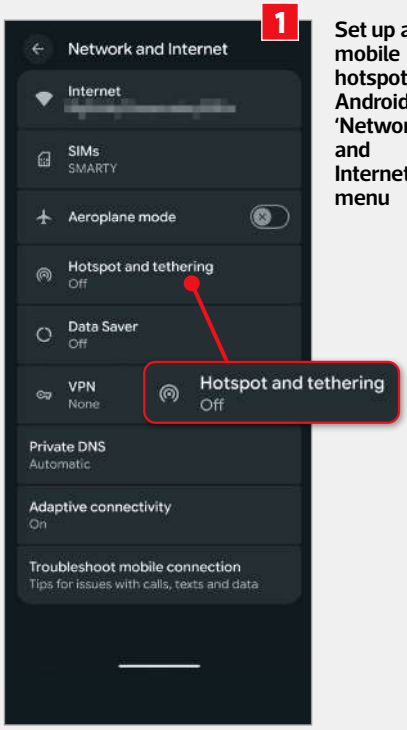
Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

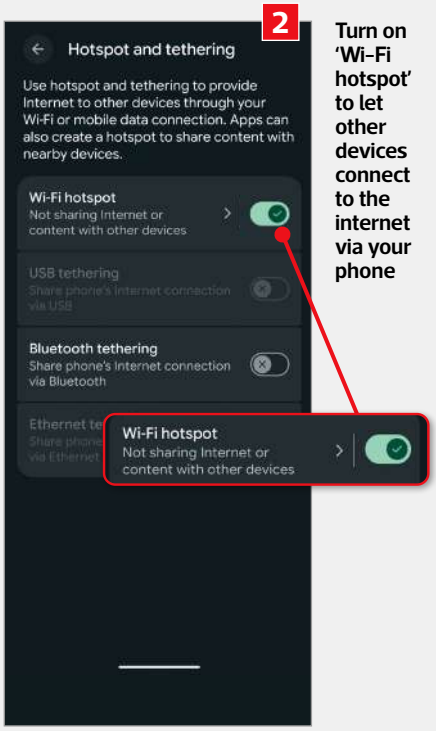
Can I get mobile connection for my Fire TV Stick?

Q We're fortunate enough to own a narrowboat, on which we cruise during the summer. In the evenings, we enjoy a bit of TV. Currently, we have a 12V self-tuning channel seeker on the roof of the boat, linked to the 240V TV, which is powered through an inverter from a battery. However, we only ever seem to get BBC, ITV and some other minor commercial channels. Currently we have an old 32in set with no USB port for a dongle, so I know I'll need a new TV for any advances. Is there a way to raise a one-off internet link and pair it to a Fire TV Stick, say?

Michael Rook



Set up a mobile hotspot in Android's 'Network and Internet' menu


2
Hotspot and tethering
Use hotspot and tethering to provide Internet to other devices through your Wi-Fi or mobile data connection. Apps can also create a hotspot to share content with nearby devices.
Wi-Fi hotspot
Not sharing Internet or content with other devices
USB tethering
Bluetooth tethering
Share phone's Internet connection via Bluetooth
Wi-Fi hotspot
Not sharing Internet or content with other devices

Turn on 'Wi-Fi hotspot' to let other devices connect to the internet via your phone

A Yes, you can do this. In fact, it's pretty straightforward – but whether it proves better than your current setup will depend very much on whether you can receive a 4G or 5G mobile-phone signal wherever you happen to moor up.

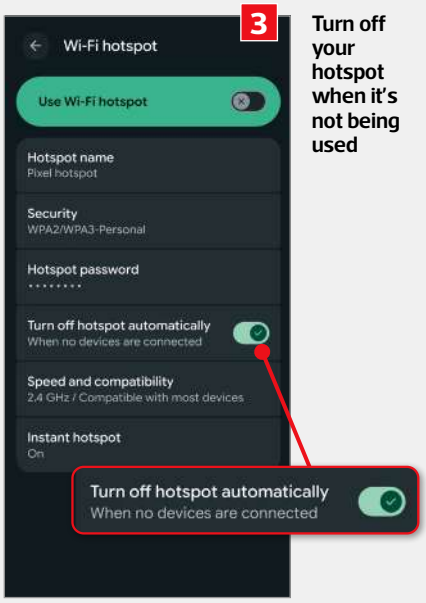
The simplest approach is to use your smartphone as a wireless hotspot. To do this, just enable the phone's personal hotspot feature, then connect the Fire TV Stick to it over Wi-Fi. On an iPhone, tap Settings followed by Mobile Service and then Personal Hotspot, then tap to turn on 'Allow Others to Join'. In Android, tap Settings followed by 'Network and Internet' and then 'Hotspot and tethering' (see screenshot 1) before tapping to flip the Wi-Fi hotspot switch to its On position (see screenshot 2).

With this done, the Fire TV Stick will 'see' the phone's hotspot just as any other Wi-Fi router, letting you stream from whatever service you want. However, while exact figures will vary from service to service, be aware that streaming video can eat through a lot of data, with around 1 or 2GB per hour of footage a fair rule of thumb. So you'll want to make sure your mobile plan includes enough data (and that the provider allows this data to be used for tethering, as not all do).

Also ensure you switch on 'Turn off hotspot automatically' (see screenshot 3) to prevent your data being eaten up inadvertently. You'll probably also want to keep the phone on charge while you're watching, because acting as a hotspot can quickly drain the battery.

Alternatively, you could invest in a 4G/5G router with its own data SIM, sometimes referred to as a MiFi (mobile Wi-Fi) device. It's similar to using a mobile-phone hotspot and won't necessarily be any better, but it could serve as a more permanent solution – one that you can just leave plugged in and positioned in a place on your boat where you're likely to get the best signal.

Three, for example, offers a 4G/5G MiFi unit for £22 a month with unlimited data and no upfront payment, albeit with a minimum 24-month commitment (www.snipca.com/56913). If you'd prefer not to be tied to a long contract, the cost is £249 for the device and then £35 a month for a one-month rolling plan.



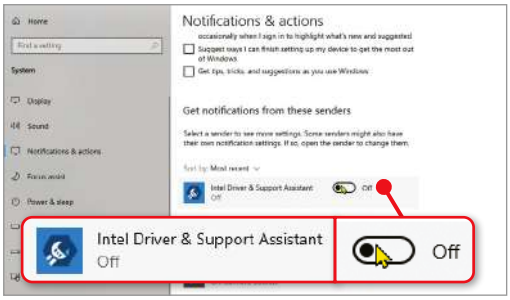
Turn off your hotspot when it's not being used

Why am I getting these Intel update alerts?

Q I'm running Windows 11 Home. Recently, a notification advised me that an update is available for my Intel processor. I searched Windows Update and elsewhere but turned up nothing. Device Manager showed four entries under Processors for my Intel Pentium Gold G6405 CPU. I tried clicking 'Update driver' but was told the best ones are already installed. I then checked Intel's Driver & Support Assistant, which said one update was available for the integrated graphics. Clicking 'Learn more' revealed it was issued in 2022, and that the product went 'end of life' at the end of the same year and might have vulnerabilities.

Why has Intel now issued this notification some three years late? What is meant by 'end of life', and why should my CPU have vulnerabilities? Am I better to rely on Device Manager and any Windows updates?

Adrian Kenyon



Turn off alerts for the Intel Driver & Support Assistant in the 'Notifications & actions' menu

A This is a form of false positive caused by the Intel Driver & Support Assistant (IDSA), but it does have some logic. Your G6405 CPU is a 10th-generation chip launched in 2021, but it uses the same integrated graphics that Intel has been using since its 6th-generation processors from several years earlier. It's these 6th-generation graphics that went 'end of life' in 2022. That means that Intel won't be issuing any more updates for 6th-generation graphics, including patches for any new vulnerabilities that might be found – though none is currently known to exist.

So, while your CPU is relatively new, its graphics component is based on much older tech that Intel stopped supporting a year after you bought it. That's what IDSA has detected. It's popped up only recently probably because Intel has updated the tool's database. Old drivers can be flagged as new, even if they're not.

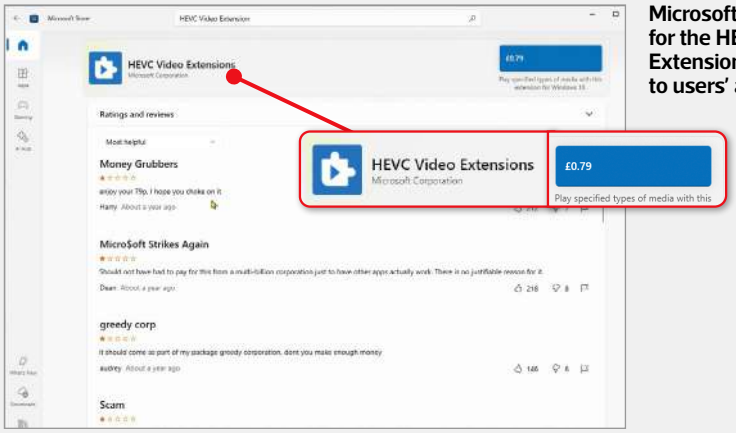
In practice, you don't have much to worry about right now – or probably for a few years yet. Intel has stopped producing new drivers for the integrated graphics element, but you'll continue to get security or compatibility fixes Microsoft deems necessary via Windows Update.

If the IDSA alerts annoy you, you can disable them. First click Start followed by the Settings cog, then System followed by 'Notifications & actions'. Scroll down and click the entry for Intel Driver & Support Assistant (see screenshot). You can either switch its slider off, silencing everything, or click the name itself to fine-tune which notifications you receive and how.

Should I pay for Microsoft's codec?

Q My wife's Asus Vivobook laptop will only play H.264 videos, whereas my Dell will play both H.264 and HEVC (H.265). Why does one Windows laptop support HEVC H.265 and the other doesn't? The Vivobook says it needs a codec, suggesting HEVC Video Extensions from the Microsoft Store, at a cost of 79p (www.snipca.com/56916, see screenshot). Should we pay this or is there a free alternative? The HEVC Video Extensions codec has a very poor rating in the Microsoft Store!

John Axford



Microsoft charges 79p for the HEVC Video Extensions codec – much to users' annoyance

A H.265, or HEVC, is a newer, better format than H.264 but it isn't included with Windows 10 or 11. That's because to do so Microsoft would have to pay licence fees, and it has chosen not to do that. Individual PC manufacturers make their own decisions, and it seems that Dell has stumped up while Asus hasn't, at least for your wife's laptop.

To be fair to Microsoft, its 79p codec does work just fine – but the tens of thousands of one-star reviews reflect how incensed people are at the company's penny-pinching. We share that view.

Fortunately, there are free alternatives. The simplest is to install a player that already includes HEVC/H.265 support, such as the ever-popular VLC media player (www.videolan.org).

Alternatively, get the trusted K-Lite pack, as this adds system-wide HEVC support for other video software, so your wife's videos should then play in pretty much anything. It's a free download from www.codecguide.com.

How I do report phishing emails to Microsoft?

Q I'm getting emails supposedly from Microsoft with fake invoices thanking me for subscribing to expensive services. I know they're phishing attempts and ignore them. I'd like to inform Microsoft, but can't find how. Microsoft's procedures for reporting phishing seem only to apply for users of Outlook, Defender and 365 products, which I don't use.

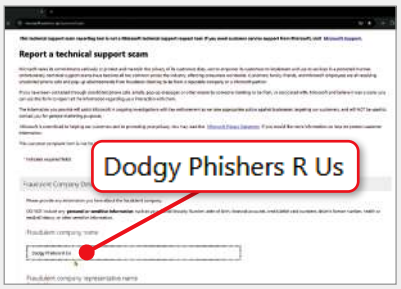
I assumed Microsoft would want to know who is impersonating the company, but it seems not. Am I missing something here?

Martyn Pearce

A It's true that Outlook and other Microsoft tools have scam-reporting tools built in, but these all lead to the same place: a huge digital data pit from which Microsoft measures trends and identifies new scam tactics.

We suspect it doesn't encourage reports from users of non-Microsoft tools because literally billions of dodgy emails are circulated every day, and it's impossible for any one company to do much about them. Its own tools gather more than enough data.

The company does operate a dedicated scam-reporting page for frauds that impersonate Microsoft, which you'll find at www.microsoft.com/reportascam (see screenshot). However, the company receives huge numbers of reports each day – so don't expect a personal response.

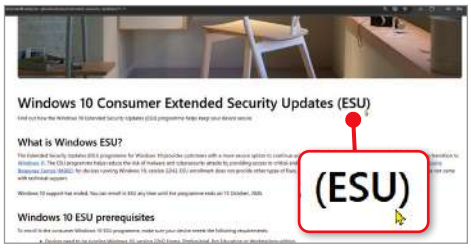


You can report a scam to Microsoft, but don't expect a specific response

My PC won't upgrade to Windows 11 – do I need to buy a new one?

Q My PC can't upgrade to Windows 11. I'm disabled, close to housebound and living on a pension. My PC is my lifeline to the outside world. Must I find the money for a new PC? Basically, I need some advice. I think many other readers do too.

Steve Merrick

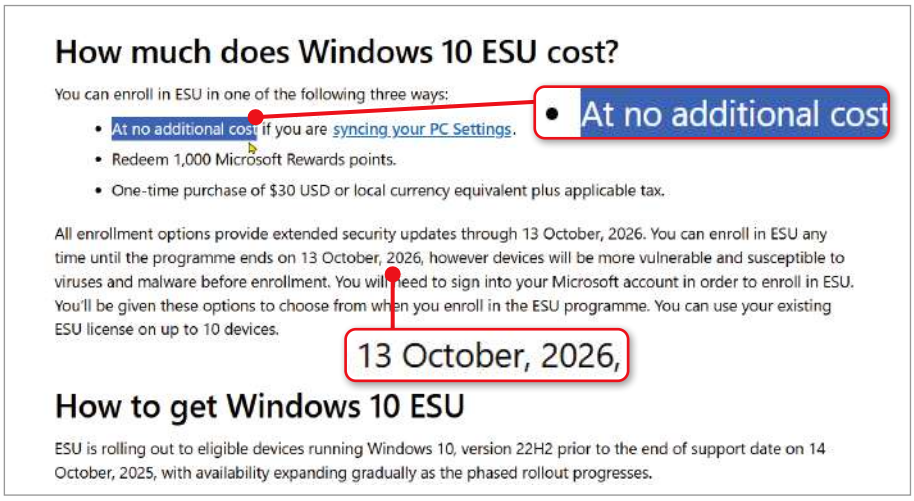


Microsoft has already back-pedalled on support for Windows 10, and it might do so again

A We've had loads of letters along these lines, and we expect many more. Inevitably we'll end up repeating ourselves a bit, but we're here to help.

With that in mind, first of all don't panic. There's every chance Windows 10 will continue working safely for years to come. Microsoft has already back-pedalled, and now offers free extended security updates (ESU – see screenshot above right) until at least October 2026 to anyone who uses OneDrive to sync (www.snipca.com/56914 – see screenshot below). With hundreds of millions of people still using Windows 10, we wouldn't be remotely surprised if the company extends support still further. It might charge a fee (around £25 - as it currently does if you don't sync through OneDrive), but that'll be far cheaper than buying a new PC.

Even if not, a Windows 10 PC won't just stop working overnight come 13 October 2026. Rather, if Microsoft really does withdraw all consumer support on that date – and many industry analysts don't believe that it will – then the operating system will become less safe over time. However, as long as you have security software installed, active and up to date, you'll have a basic level of protection that should keep you going for a while yet.


How much does Windows 10 ESU cost?
You can enroll in ESU in one of the following three ways:
At no additional cost if you are syncing your PC Settings.
Redeem 1,000 Microsoft Rewards points.
One-time purchase of $30 USD or local currency equivalent plus applicable tax.
At no additional cost
All enrollment options provide extended security updates through 13 October, 2026. You can enroll in ESU any time until the programme ends on 13 October, 2026, however devices will be more vulnerable and susceptible to viruses and malware before enrollment. You will need to sign into your Microsoft account in order to enroll in ESU. You'll be given these options to choose from when you enroll in the ESU programme. You can use your existing ESU license on up to 10 devices.
13 October, 2026,
How to get Windows 10 ESU
ESU is rolling out to eligible devices running Windows 10, version 22H2 prior to the end of support date on 14 October, 2025, with availability expanding gradually as the phased rollout progresses.

Extended support for Windows 10 is free to OneDrive users until October 2026

Q: Should I use M-Discs to preserve my photos?

A: Issue 677, page 64 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

Why doesn't Windows recognise my new SSD?

Q I bought a 64GB M.2 SATA NVMe SSD and put it in a KingData NVMe case, but I can't get it to work with my Windows 11 laptop. I just see a message that says the location is not available, and an 'incorrect function'. Any ideas?

Mike Minshull

A We think you've bought an incompatible drive, either because it was incorrectly described or because you got confused over two different technologies – which, believe us, is very easy to do here!

We say this because there's no such thing as an "M.2 SSD 64GB SATA NVMe" – an M.2 drive is either SATA or NVMe. The KingData enclosure you've bought is for NVMe SSDs, so we suspect the drive you purchased is actually SATA.

We say it's easy to get confused because the two types look almost identical. A SATA M.2 SSD will have two small notches on its connector edge, known as B+M keys (see diagram above). But an NVMe drive has just a single notch on the right-hand side, known as an M-key. Because a SATA drive has both notches, it will physically fit into an NVMe slot or enclosure – but it won't actually work.

Windows will detect a 'drive', but really all it's 'seeing' is the circuit board in the enclosure that controls the USB connection: your PC can't actually communicate with the incompatible SATA drive via the NVMe interface. So nothing is faulty, but you need to replace either the SSD or the enclosure. KingData does sell a SATA enclosure (around £10 from www.snipca.com/56915, pictured above right). However, NVMe is the faster standard – so if speed is important, you might want to consider an NVMe drive. Otherwise, replacing the enclosure with a SATA-compatible one will solve the problem.

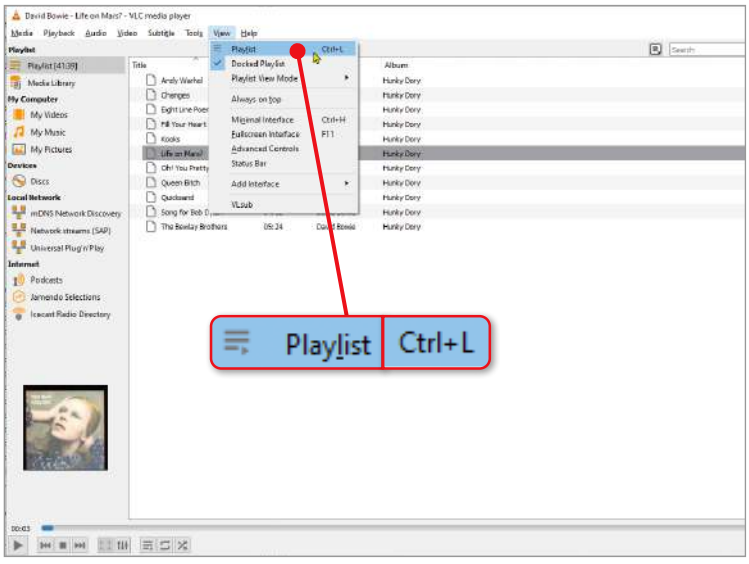
Hard-drive enclosures are compatible with either SATA or NVMe drives, so make sure you buy the right one for your SSD

Why does VLC play tracks in the wrong order?

Q I'm in the process of converting my old LPs to MP3, putting each album into its own folder with the individual track names. I prefix each track with 01, 02 and so on. For some reason that I cannot see, VLC plays the tracks only in random order, while Windows Media Player plays them exactly as they were on the LP and as named (ie, 01, 02 and so on), which is obviously how I want to listen to them. As I can't get Windows Media Player to play some albums, how can I get VLC to play them correctly?

George Chappell

A There are a couple of possible causes for this. The first is that you have VLC's Random (also known as Shuffle) option selected. This is done either by clicking the crossed-arrows icon at the bottom of the VLC window, or by pressing R when VLC is running.



Add a new column to VLC's main window to let you add track numbers

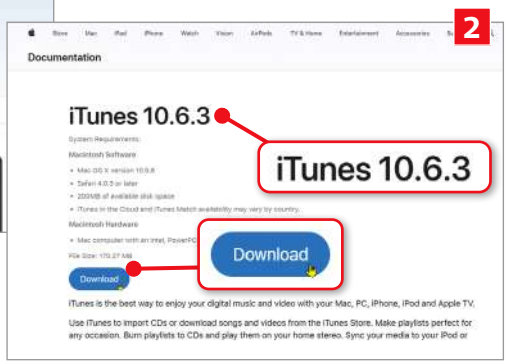
However, it's just as likely that VLC isn't set to play back by track number – and that's a little trickier to discern or fix. First, open the View menu and then choose Playlist, or use the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+L. Next, right-click the heading labels in the main window above the track listing and then click to tick 'Track number'. This will add a new column to the main window, which should list the 01, 02 (and so on) track numbers you've applied to the file names. Finally, click the new 'Track number' heading label to sort the track listing by this column, and your album will now play in the correct order.

How can I play music on my old iPod?

Q I have an Apple iPod Nano 5 that's apparently no longer supported by iTunes, so I'm stuck with its current contents. Is there a program or app that I could use to manage my collection?

David Duncan

The Apple Devices app, along with Apple Music, should let you transfer music to an old iPod



This version of iTunes works with older devices and is available for free from Apple's website

A Apple has created some confusion when it comes to syncing its devices with PCs. That's partly because it's wants to retire the iTunes brand, which seems increasingly dated in a world where Apple offers much more than music. However, it has done this by introducing a bunch of new apps – including Apple Music (www.snipca.com/56917), Apple TV (www.snipca.com/56918) and Apple Devices (www.snipca.com/56919, (see screenshot 1) – but without a clear vision of how they all fit together. You can read more about this on the Apple website at www.snipca.com/56920.

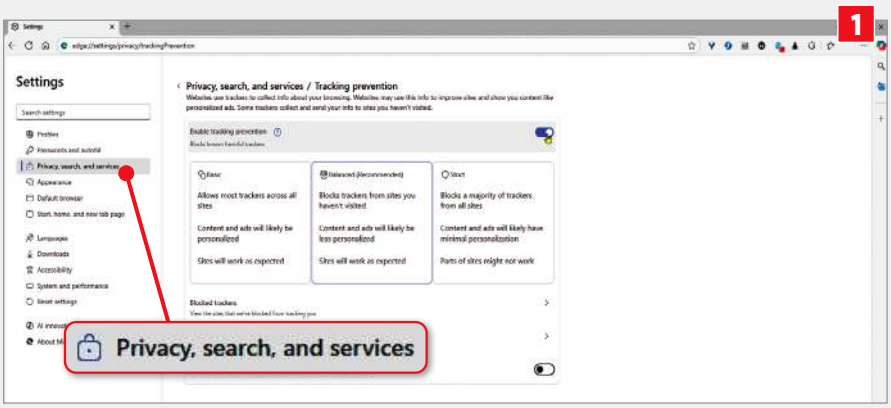
In theory, a combination of Apple Music and Apple Devices should be sufficient to transfer tunes from Music to an Apple iPod (or an iPhone or iPad). However, even Apple admits this combination is no good for audiobooks or podcasts, where iTunes is still required. Moreover, Apple Devices may not work with older Apple devices – so iTunes may still be required!

It's all a bit of a mess. The solution in your case is actually iTunes – but not the latest (and final) version. Instead, you'll need to download an older version that Apple keeps available on its website, especially for people like yourself that still have older gadgets. That version is iTunes 10.6.3, and you can download it from www.snipca.com/56921 (see screenshot 2).

Can I stop Google's CAPTCHAs?

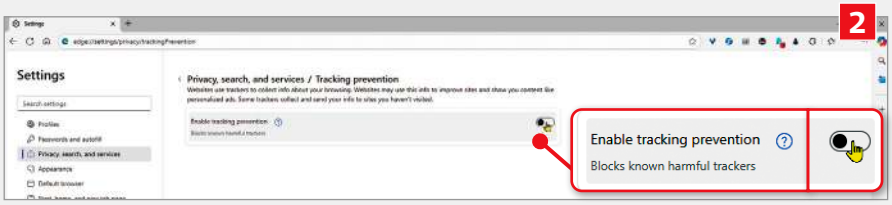
Q I use Microsoft Edge with Google as my search engine. Recently, Google keeps asking me to confirm that I'm not a robot via multiple CAPTCHA diagrams. Google says this is because it's detected 'unusual traffic' from my computer. It doesn't say what this activity is. As far as I'm aware I've not visited any dodgy sites and I haven't detected any malware or similar. Is there a way to disable these Google requests?

Seán Mahony



Turning off Edge's tracking prevention may stop Google thinking you're a robot

A It's not possible to stop Google or any other website from displaying CAPTCHAs: that's purely down to the individual website publishers. Regardless, they're not appearing because of your browsing habits, but because Google believes automated searches are coming from your connection. This is typically because of the use of a VPN. Do you have one installed? If so, try disabling it when carrying out Google searches – you'll probably find the CAPTCHAs quickly cease. Signing into a Google account when browsing should help, too.



In addition, Edge does have a couple of privacy features that, while useful, might trigger Google's defences. Open Settings and then choose 'Privacy, search, and services' (see screenshot 1). Now click to flip the 'Enable tracking prevention' switch to its Off position (see screenshot 2).

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Various motherboard sizes?

Q Partly prompted by past articles in *Computeractive*, I'm thinking about building my first PC and I keep seeing all these terms such as ATX, MicroATX and Mini-ITX. I get that they're different sizes of motherboard, but what difference does that actually make? Does a bigger board mean a faster or better computer? What do all these terms mean anyway?

Steve Ellison

A This is a question that every first-time PC builder confronts. The short answer is that motherboard size doesn't necessarily affect performance directly, but it will dictate what you can – or indeed can't – fit and connect.

The key standard is ATX, which stands for Advanced Technology eXtended, introduced by Intel in the 1990s. A full-size ATX board (like the MSI model pictured) measures 305x244mm and affords plenty of room for a build, typically meaning multiple expansion and memory slots, plus loads of ports.

An ATX motherboard such as MSI's Gaming Plus range will allow you to fit the fastest, most powerful components

MicroATX comes in at 244x244mm, generally dropping a few expansion slots but keeping most features. Mini-ITX is smaller still, at just 170mm square. These are intended for smaller builds, but you can expect numerous limitations, such as only a couple of memory slots and only one PCIe expansion slot. There are smaller sizes still, including Nano-ITX and Pico-ITX, but these are really the preserve of specialist builds.

A PC is the sum of its parts and a bigger board doesn't necessarily mean faster – it just means more room to play with. All else being equal with a full-size ATX board (and case) you could, for example, fit four memory modules and several expansion cards, including the chunkiest of modern graphics cards. But a smaller motherboard (and case) might restrict you to just a couple of memory modules and a lower-profile graphics card, which will deliver less performance.

So, if you're building for maximum performance, an ATX board is probably the way to go. But if you want to create something compact, a smaller build based on a MicroATX or Mini-ITX motherboard is unlikely to disappoint – you might just have to compromise a bit on the extras.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

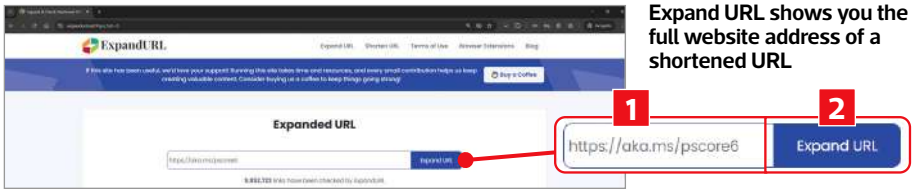
Is aka.ms safe?

Q I've seen mention of aka.ms a few times in your magazine, and also encountered it myself recently – at the top of my PowerShell window. There, I saw a link to https://aka.ms/pscore6, with a message saying I should try the new cross-platform PowerShell. What is aka.ms? Is it safe?

Joe Thorn

A First, let's start with what aka.ms is – that's Microsoft's own URL-shortening service. The company uses it to turn long, unwieldy website addresses into something much snappier (much like *Computeractive*'s own snipca system). It can be used only by Microsoft employees. So, it is both useful and trustworthy.

In other words, if you know, you know. But we think this clashes with Microsoft's own security stance. Like every other major tech operator, the company has for years warned users not to click on strange-looking links – especially ones that don't clearly say where they're taking you. However, that's exactly what Microsoft's own tool sometimes does, via an aka.ms link.



Expand URL shows you the full website address of a shortened URL

If you're unsure about the veracity of a short URL, or are simply curious about where it might lead, it's a good idea to find out.

There are numerous online tools that'll expand a shortened URL, such as Expand URL (www.expandurl.net). Just type or paste the short address into the URL field (1 in our screenshot) and then click the Expand URL button 2. This particular service shows you not only the real, full URL but also displays a thumbnail view of the destination website – helping you to decide quickly whether a short link is safe to follow.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 31 Dec

- Are there any no-contract SIM cards?
- How do I open my password-protected ZIP file?
- Am I stuck with a BT router? ...And many more

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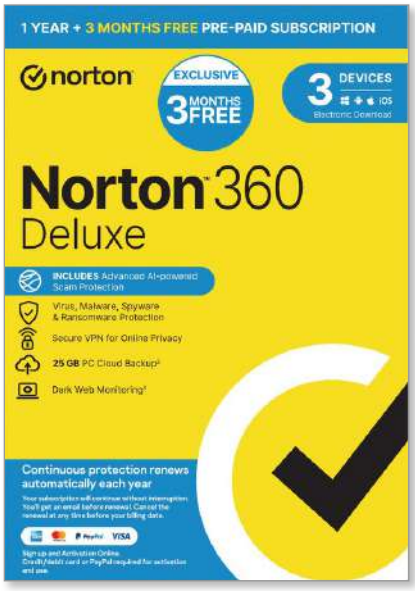

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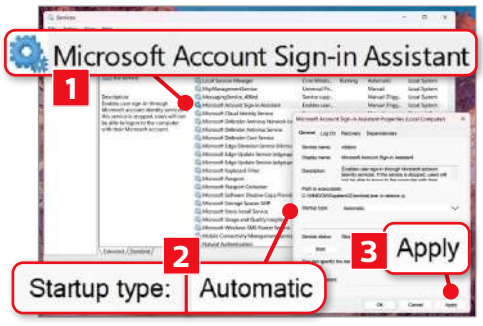
Is Windows 10 Pro excluded from extended updates?

Q When I bought my last PC it was only £10 extra to have Windows 10 Pro installed on it, so I took that option. I want to keep using it, but I'm struggling to sign up for Microsoft's Extended Support Updates (ESU), despite trying all your suggestions in Issue 721's problem-fixing feature (page 62). I got a 'success' comment in Command Prompt when following your advice to check for disk errors, but now Microsoft still tells me "something went wrong". Is Windows 10 Pro excluded from the ESUs? If not, what else can you suggest?

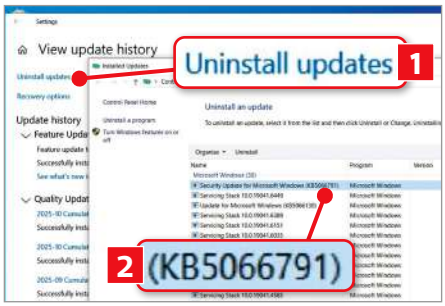
Ian Yems

A Windows 10 Pro is definitely eligible for ESU enrolment – Microsoft confirms this at www.snipca.com/57080 – so there's something else going on here. People with similar problems appear to have had some success using the following fixes. Try them all in turn, and attempt to enrol again after each one.

First, press Win+R, type services.msc and press Enter. In the Services window that opens, look for Microsoft Account Sign-in Assistant and make sure it's listed under Status as Running – if not, double-click it (1 in our screenshot below), set 'Startup type' to Automatic 2 and click Apply 3. Then click Start, followed by OK. Try enrolling again.



If you see a 'Something went wrong' error, check Microsoft Account Sign-in Assistant is running



Click Start, Settings, 'Update & Security', 'View update history', then 'Uninstall updates' and uninstall KB5066791

If Microsoft Account Sign-in Assistant was already running, or if you're still unable to enrol after starting it, try clicking Start, Settings, 'Update & Security', then 'Find my device'. If 'Find my device' is turned off, click the Change button and turn the slider on. See if you're able to enrol in ESU now.

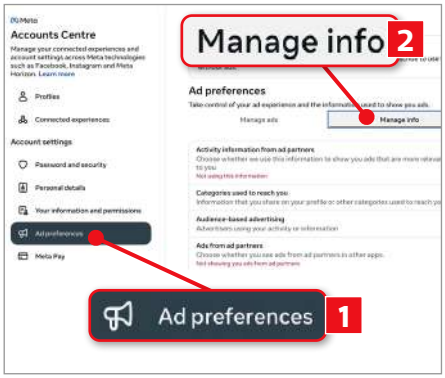
If not, go back to the 'Find my device' settings, click 'Turn on the location setting' then click the Change button under 'Location for this device is off' and switch the slider on. Try enrolling again.

If none of the above fixes work for you, try navigating to Start, Settings, 'Update & Security', then clicking 'View update history'. Click 'Uninstall updates' in the top left (1 in our screenshot above), then look for the update KB5066791 2 – click this, then click Uninstall to remove it, and try enrolling one more time.

Why didn't your Meta privacy instructions work?

Q I was interested in Issue 722's feature on stopping Meta spying on you (page 60) and managed to 'clear previous activity' and 'disconnect future activity' using your instructions. But I had less success trying to turn off personalised ads. I reviewed my 'recent ad activity' and some of my 'Ad topics', but couldn't find 'Ad settings' on the Ad Preferences screen. I resorted to reviewing 'Ad topics' and disallowing some of them before giving up. Can you help?

Richard Curtis



Meta changed the name of the 'Ad settings' option to 'Manage info' since we wrote our feature in Issue 722

A Since writing our feature, Meta has altered the naming of some of its privacy settings. The 'Ad settings' option is now called 'Manage info'. You can reach this from Facebook via your PC's web browser by clicking your user icon and choosing 'Settings & privacy', then Settings and clicking 'See more in Accounts Centre' on the left. Click 'Ad preferences' (1 in our screenshot above) then 'Manage info' 2. From there you can follow the remaining instructions in our feature.

Did you make a mistake when explaining DNS?

Q I was disappointed to read in Issue 722's 'Question of the Fortnight' (page 10) that DNS "turns a service's name (like Lloyds Bank) into an IP address that computers can locate and connect to its website (www.lloydsbank.com)." Even ignoring the confusing syntax, this is misleading. Could you publish a correction?

Richard Mellish

A Apologies – as you suggest, our explanation of how DNS works was perhaps overly simplistic. To clarify, DNS translates a website's domain name (such as www.lloydsbank.com) into the IP address your computer's web browser requires to connect to it.

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

Active noise cancelling Method for reducing unwanted sound by adding a second sound.

Aspect ratio A measurement of the shape of a screen.

Authenticator An app that generates time-sensitive, one-time codes for two-factor authentication (2FA).

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Beta A version of software that's being tested.

Browser-engine wrapper A simple tool that lets apps show web pages without running a full browser.

Calibration The process of checking that colours are accurate on a monitor.

Captcha Distorted text you have to type to prove you're a human.

Cast To send content from your PC, phone or tablet to your TV.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

CFG Configuration file. Generic term for a file used to configure the settings of a program.

Chatbot An AI program designed to recreate conversation with humans.

Code Written instructions that tell software how to execute tasks.

Codec A file that tells a PC how to record or play a type of media file.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website.

Copilot+ An enhanced version of Microsoft's Copilot AI tool.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

Cryptocurrency A digital currency not backed by any country.

DDR4/5 The latest, fastest types of computer memory.

Deprecation When a software feature is phased out and no longer recommended for use.

DHCP A system where one device on a network, normally the router, distributes network addresses to the others on request.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

DNS A technology that associates computers with their addresses on the internet.

DOCX The default file format used by Word 2007 and later.

Dolby Atmos Surround-sound technology that adds 'height' to audio.

Dolby Vision Dolby's HDR screen technology.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

DTS-HD High-definition audio format delivering lossless, multi-channel sound for home cinema.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so only sender and recipient can read them.

EPUB A file format used by many popular ebook readers.

Equaliser Changes the tone of music produced by a device.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

False positive When an antivirus program wrongly detects a malware infection.

Field of vision The amount of space measured in angles that can be seen from the camera lens.

Forked When developers take source code from software to make another program.

Freemium A business model where basic services are provided for free, while more advanced features must be paid for.

Ghosting The appearance on screens of an offset second image that's a ghost-like facsimile of the first.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second. 1GHz is equal to 1,000MHz.

GPU A chip designed to create 3D graphics, but which can also be used for other computing tasks.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

H.264 A type of MPEG4 video that is used on Blu-ray discs.

H.265 It offers the same level of picture quality as AVC, but with better compression.

HDMI Connection that transmits high-definition video and audio.

HDR10+ High-dynamic range 10. Current industry standard for TVs.

Hotspot A public area covered by a Wi-Fi network that allows you to access the internet.

HTTP The technology that sends data between your browser and the web.

HTTPS The secure version of HTTP.

IP address Internet Protocol address. A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IP68 Ingress protection rating. Resistant to dust, general dirt and sand, and can survive underwater for 30 minutes at depths up to 1.5m.

JPEG A common type of image file created by digital cameras.

LAN Local-area network. A computer network in one place, such as a home or office.

Large language model A type of AI algorithm that analyses huge amounts of data sets to summarise and create content.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light.

LPDDR4/LPDDR5 Low-power mobile RAM versions.

M.2 A standard specification for PC expansion cards and connectors.

Manifest V2/V3 Chrome's specifications for browser extensions.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card.

MicroUSB Miniature version of USB.

MiFi A service that creates hotspots out of phones' 3G and 4G networks.

MKV Matroska. An open-source type of video file.

MVNO A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network rather than its own.

NAS A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared with PCs.

.NET Microsoft's tool for building software.

NPU Specialised chip designed for performing AI tasks.

NVMe An interface that lets solid-state drives work faster.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone.

PCIe A faster version of PCI - a slot on the motherboard for expansion cards,

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

Plug-in A small program that adds extra features to software.

Port forwarding Choosing which computer in your network a router should connect to.

PowerShell A Windows tool for automating commands.

Proxy A computer that sits between your computer and the internet and filters the connection.

QR code A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

RAR Roshal Archive. A format for storing compressed files.

Recovery key A password to access a locked account.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Refurbished A second-hand device that has been repaired by its manufacturer so that it can be resold and reused.

RSS A simple format for distributing news headlines and other content from the web.

RTF A file format used to transfer files between different types of word-processing programs.

SATA An interface for connecting hard drives to a computer.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

Sideload To install apps without using the official Android store.

SIM The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

SIM-only A phone package in which you pay only for the data.

Spyware Software installed (usually surreptitiously) to monitor a computer's use.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that uses no moving parts.

Static IP address An IP address that stays the same every time you go online.

System restore point System files stored at a given time to which Windows can revert if a problem occurs.

Tethering Turning a phone into a modem to give internet access to a computer or tablet.

Thunderbolt A very fast port for connecting external storage to a PC.

Tooltip A message that appears when a cursor hovers over an option.

TOPS Trillion operations per second. A measure of a PC's processing power when performing AI tasks.

Transition A way of joining two video clips together or moving from one clip to another.

Trojan A malicious computer program that's disguised as a different, harmless program.

Ultrawide Offering a field of view that's wider than traditional cameras.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C Connector that's reversible.

Virtual server A server that's based online, and shared by multiple users

VPN Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

WAV file An audio file, used for recording music to disk.

WebP Google's image format.

Wi-Fi 5 A standard for wireless with higher transfer speeds than 802.11n.

Wi-Fi 6E Wi-Fi 6 extended to include the 6GHz band.

Widget A small program that runs on the Windows desktop.

Zero-day vulnerability Previously unknown software flaw that can be exploited before it's fixed.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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Know How

Tired of online file-conversion tools with annoying restrictions, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Convert unlimited files for free

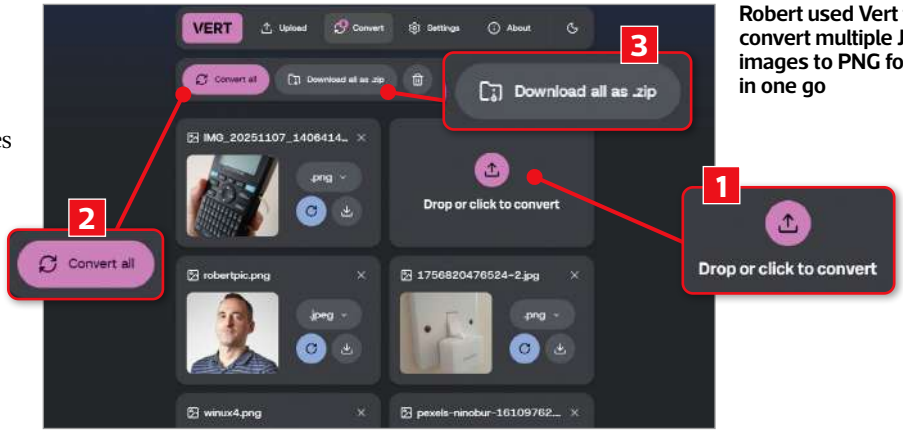
If I compiled a tech 'naughty list' for 2025, a la Father Christmas, there'd be plenty to choose from. AI 'slop' would top the list, followed by ads on streaming services, cloud-hosting outages and myriad junk that plagued our PCs and phones throughout the year (see our Cover Feature, page 50).

> I was impressed by Vert's range of image formats, including '.vicar'

Another bugbear concerns online file-conversion tools, which promise so much and deliver it so annoyingly. Whether it's ad-stuffed websites, restrictions on the size and number of files you can upload, or convoluted conversion systems that require you to buy credits or enter your email address to obtain the converted file, these tools get my proverbial goat.

"Well don't use them then," you may say, but I often need to convert documents, images and videos into formats I can actually open. And yes, there are file-conversion programs I can download, but in theory an online tool should be faster.

So I was excited to discover a new online file converter called Vert (www.snipca.com/57157). Not only is this free to use, but it has no size limits or ads, and converts files on your device rather than in the 'cloud', so their content remains private. Vert sounded too good to be true, so I decided to give it a go.



Robert used Vert to convert multiple JPEG images to PNG format in one go

The Vert homepage consists of a large 'Drop or click to convert' box and lists of all the file formats it supports. I was particularly impressed by the range of image formats, which included the obscure '.vicar' (developed by NASA to store pictures from space missions). Less reassuring were the absence of PDF in the Documents list and an asterisked 'Server supported' link under Video – which I'll come to later.

I clicked the convert box and uploaded a JPEG from my PC. Vert opened a new page, with a dropdown menu of image formats. I selected '.png' and clicked the 'Convert this file' button. The image was quickly converted and made available to download.

I noticed Vert lets you convert multiple files in one go, if you select them through the 'Drop or click to convert' box (1 in our screenshot), then choose 'Convert all' 2. These can all be converted to different formats, or the same one – using the 'Set all to' menu – and downloaded in a single ZIP file 3. Very handy, and the conversions worked perfectly, with no quality loss.

Next, I tried converting a big (50MB) WAV file into a smaller MP3. Vert speedily performed the conversion and the downloaded file played without any problems – aside from the usual reduction in audio quality whenever you compress WAV files.

It was less successful with documents, displaying an error message when I tried to convert DOCX to RTF – though it worked fine the other way round. When I risked a PDF conversion, Vert responded "we can't convert this file".

As for videos, Vert states on its GitHub repository (www.snipca.com/57158) that, because video conversions are resource-intensive, it uploads them to a server rather than processing the files on your PC. To do this locally, you need to do something complicated involving self-hosting, which I didn't have the time or inclination to do.

In any case, Vert's server successfully – albeit slowly – converted a 100MB MKV video to MP4, and vice versa, and the resulting files played smoothly.

I noted in Vert's settings that you can speed up video conversion at the expense of quality, but even the default setting is quicker than using a desktop video converter. The settings also let you change the file-name format, so converted file names don't start with 'VERT_'.

Other than lacking PDF support, Vert is a fantastic free tool without – as far as I can tell – any catches. I can now convert multiple files into different formats in one go, without worrying about size and other restrictions.

Consider me a con-Vert.

Need help converting files? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to create a 2026 calendar using AI

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